

THE OUTCAST EMPEROR

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By the Lady HELEN (CRAVEN)

Author of "*Katherine Cromer*"

and "*Notes of a Music-Lover*".



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To

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A L'AMITIÉ ÉTERNELLE

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THE OUTCAST EMPEROR



CHAPTER I

THREE MODERN GOTHAMITES

"TALKING of spoons," remarked Tralee, breaking in as his custom was, with a reference to something which had not gone before, "silver's a poor inferior thing to call the one that was in your mouth when you were born. It must have been stuck full of diamonds."

He emphasised these remarks by vigorously flapping the paper he had been pretending to read. We had been beyond the reach of papers for some weeks, and this was the only specimen, and that none too new, that we had on board. Tralee had of course seized on it at once, before I had time to look at it, so now I watched it with anxiety.

"Diamonds generally are set in silver," put in the doctor, who knows everything, and does not attempt to conceal the fact. His voice was not as clear as it might have been, because, in the hurry of leaning back in his chair, he had not paused to adjust the sun helmet, which now obscured his countenance.

"Likely enough," responded Tralee, "but what I was going to say was—"

Here half the paper escaped his grasp, and slithered across the deck in the direction of the Cathayan Ocean. Providentially a stiffish breeze was blowing at the time, and as the yacht rolled gently, it caught the flying sheet on its way, and hurled it back against the doctor's chair, round the leg of which it wrapped itself gracefully but firmly.

"The luck of the devil," said Tralee, apparently finishing some sentence which did not transpire to the public. "Shove back that topee of yours, Doctor Johnson, and say which you think looks most like a bloated aristocrat, him or me."

"Tralee's grammar gets more excruciating every day," said the doctor to me apologetically; "I think it must be the warmth of the latitude we are in."

I might here remark that the doctor's name is Pilkington. But the sobriquet of Samuel Johnson has been his for years, and will cling to him for ever, or at least till he hides his light under a bushel.

"*Revenons à nos cuillères*," I suggested.

"If there's one thing above another that I hate," said Tralee, with great severity, "it's a man making a display of being conversant with foreign languages."

"Is there any point in all this?" I asked mildly.

"Surely you never expect coherency of Tralee," exclaimed Pilkington, stooping quickly to avoid Tralee's air cushion.

"I expect him to explain himself."

"Blessed is he that expecteth nothing—" began the doctor.

"*Marrons glacées!*" I interposed hastily, for archaic jokes are not in my line. Besides, Tralee was sure to be uncivil unless I took the words out of his mouth. "Keep to the point, can't you?"

"When there is none?"

"Samuel waxeth inconsequent," I apologised, in my turn, to Tralee, "and as Saul is obviously among the prophets, I await your words of wisdom, O most sagacious Solomon!"

"Aren't you getting your Bible people a bit mixed up, old man?" asked Tralee, with the air of an interested observer. "Not that I know anything about it," he added hastily; "and, talking of Solomon, his luck must have been a joke to yours—a weak little, frivolous little joke, only fit for a comic paper."

"Your exaggerated method of expressing yourself," I remarked, "may be national and characteristic, but it is quite unedifying and fails to amuse."

"It's not meant to amuse," retorted Tralee. "By Jove! am I here as a bally court jester to your Majesty, or as a reasonable and God-fearing exponent of solemn and sober fact?"

"Hanged if I know what he's talking about!" I remarked helplessly to the doctor.

"I never do," transpired from beneath the sun helmet.

"Talking of undeserved good fortune," pursued Tralee composedly, "I look upon yours, Mr. Louis Randolph, sir, as valsing away with the biscuit. If ever larks dropped ready cooked into a man's mouth without choking him, they have into yours. Why wasn't I born under your lucky star, instead of being the poor little beggarly misfortunate cuss I am?"

Tralee is fond of referring to himself as being of microscopic proportions. Meanwhile, he measures six feet four in his socks, and during his brief career in the Guards he was known as the "Irish Giant."

"When I lived in Upper Tooting, I looked upon a blooming lord as the salt of the earth," was heard reverberating in mystic hollowness under the sun helmet,

which had slipped down a little farther during the interval.
“However, one lives and learns new sides of every question.”

“Luck is a question of opinion,” I began.

“It’s a question of oof, you mean,” put in Tralee.

“I never,” exclaimed the doctor, sittting up with a jerk which flung the sun helmet on to his shoes, “met a more unblushing worshipper of the Golden Calf than that fellow Tralee. Don’t you run away deceiving yourself, my good friend Randolph, that it’s for the pleasure of your society and the delights of your conversation that he has left his fifty years of bogland for a cycle of Cathay.”

“Go to——Upper Tooting,” retorted Tralee amiably.

Nobody takes Samuel seriously; we all know that he has altruistic and generally impossible ideas, not entirely free from absurdity, and that one of the chief of these is an ostensible contempt for coin and coin-lovers. The pride of the pauper is a fearful and a wonderful thing, and not one to be meddled with or pried into too curiously. I never understood it myself, probably for obvious reasons.

Pilkington must have had a dash of gipsy blood in his composition; at least, so, as a student of heredity, I have always surmised. He was an unusually able man, and he certainly ought to have made his mark in his profession. But after taking his degree with the greatest possible amount of *éclat*, he never put his intelligence and learning to any further use, for he lacked the negative virtues of patience and perseverance, and he had a physical incapacity for remaining in one spot for any length of time. He had no fortune of his own, and furnished the funds for his wanderings from his literary productions, which were of so high an order of merit that it is surprising they should have achieved popular success. He was an excellent travelling companion, for his little finger held more

information than most men's bodies, and it never comes amiss to have a walking encyclopædia at your elbow. But I do not say that I could have kept up at the pressure of plain living and high thinking, unless I had a continual relief in the company of an ass like Tralee.

Tralee was the traditional impecunious Irish peer, and as he was very extravagant, very vague in his ideas, and very susceptible to beauty, especially when it was dowerless, his family looked upon me as a positive pocket Providence for keeping him out of England, while I was unfeignedly grateful to him for allowing himself to be kept. As to myself, I suffered from the usual complaint of the unnecessarily rich man—that of not knowing what to do with my time. When Tralee says that I am born lucky, I must beg to differ. My career was ruined by the foolish want of consideration displayed by my relations, who died and left me a large fortune at an inapposite moment. I might have been an ambassador, and then the money would have been useful. As it is, I am nothing at all.

It was in my yacht, the *Flosshilde*, that Tralee and Pilkington and I were crossing the Yellow Seas. When we set out on our cruise, the *Flosshilde* was a sufficiently recent acquisition to be like a new toy to me; but at this date, after several weeks at sea, it was beginning to pall. It was no longer absorbing to go below and watch the engines; the length of our diurnal run became a subject of indifference, and the absence of news from the mainland was growing a positive nuisance. We purposed to be away a year, and with this arrangement Pilkington and Tralee appeared perfectly content, but I used to lie awake in my bunk and reflect on the prospect till it became a nightmare. We were on our way to Tokio; but the Land of the Chrysanthemum was no novelty to

me, and I was only pausing there in a touching spirit of pure self-sacrifice on Tralee's behalf. Afterwards we proposed to steam straight across to San Francisco, and I cannot say the trip sounded alluring.

However, at this juncture of affairs, we put into the harbour of Can-Say, one of the few ports in the Yellow Empire which encourages the entrance of the foreign devil. I had been at Can-Say before, and knew by experience how much enchantment is lent to the view thereof by distance, so I was entirely content to remain on board while my companions went ashore in the dinghy to see if there were any letters for them (there weren't), and generally to inspect the town. I am of opinion that I scored, for it was a warm day; and even lounging in a deck-chair under an awning, I found myself assailed through my senses at all points. The brazen sky reflected itself in the turgid sea, and a strong yellow light cast an eye-destroying halo round every object within the range of vision. Pungent whiffs of indescribable, but very unpleasant odours, were borne towards me from the stirred mud of the harbour's depths, and from the native craft that slid by the *Flosshilde* as she lay at anchor. The piercing voices of the Celestials broke even that foetid air. There was life enough in the harbour, evidence enough of human beings eking out their time on earth with business and clamour, but of cheerfulness there was little or none. The Celestials make plenty of noise; they laugh loudly but not gaily, and are never heard singing over their work. The gloom of an immemorial tradition seems to hang over them, and the glamour of the Far East makes them incomprehensible to us of another skin and nature.

The whole harbour was full of people who had no time or inclination for gaiety or picturesqueness, meditations

or moralising, or any other such wasteful pursuit. Modern steamers bound westward with their cargoes of tea, contrasted with three-masted junks, with their strange high sails, and huge floating rafts, on which an uncounted quantity of the surplus population live and die, with no occupation but to yell at each other, and no diversion but to smoke opium—a strange amphibious existence, devoid of attraction.

Tralee and Pilkington were not communicative about their trip ashore. They started in a gay spirit of anticipation, and doubtless did not care to evoke my triumph—at their disillusion. “I told you so,” is a remark which would provoke an individual with the concentrated enduring power of Job, Moses, and All Saints. I need hardly mention that neither Tralee nor Pilkington have anything in common with those quasi-historic personages. Therefore they were probably wise in saying as little as possible. One thing at least they had achieved. They had obtained a pearl of great price in the shape of an English newspaper. It must have cost the weight of its thin sheets in gold, a high price even for such a relic of hoar antiquity; but though its date was almost as prehistoric as that of our own touching at Hong-Kong and the land of news, it was undoubtedly genuine and priceless to the eye. Tralee (a very illiterate person) took possession of it from the first, a circumstance which gives me cause to suspect him of being the happy discoverer, but on his falling out with Pilkington on the subject of the Golden Calf, I seized the opportunity to secure his prize.

Seeing in letters an inch long a headline which ran: “Fresh developments in the Far East,” I naturally turned to this part of the paper first. We were in the Far East at the moment, and no other quarter of the world could possess such interest. Moreover, it was just possible that

"developments" might make it advisable to evacuate the Far East as soon as might be. There was a large range of circumstances under which our exact position on the face of the globe might become awkward to intolerableness; we were travelling for *soi-disant* pleasure, which did not embrace getting into a row of any sort. Therefore I read on, blessing the new journalism which puts one out of pain by headlines giving away all the news in a few words.

"*Coup d'Etat* in Cambaluc. Listen to this, Samuel," I read out, breaking in upon the disputes of the other two. "We learn by a telegram through Reuter's agency, that the Emperor of Cathay has been dethroned, and the regency assumed by the Dowager Empress, his step-mother. The change of Government has taken place without disturbance, and will not affect the foreign policy of the Empire. The Emperor is believed to be dead."

"Enterprising old lady," ejaculated Tralee.

"I am not surprised to hear it; I never expected the old Empress would play second fiddle for any length of time," I remarked. "She is a regular king-maker, setting up emperors and knocking them down again when they become obnoxious. I suppose she has put this one quietly out of the road like the last. And that means not in the kindest way possible."

"Was it this Emperor you saw when you were an *attaché* at Cambaluc?" asked Pilkington. It was not often Samuel condescended to ask for information, but even he respected the fact that I was one of the few among men of our skin to speak face to face with the sacred Celestial Emperor.

"Yes, this one, the Emperor Chin-Wang. He was a weak, soft-looking little chap, not quite full-grown in those days."

"And the Empress, did you see her?"

"No, the Cathayan women are kept strictly secluded. I believe she was listening behind a screen, though."

"A curious people!" said Samuel thoughtfully.

"A beastly people," I appended; "they are the greatest brutes unhung, as I have no doubt the poor little devil of an Emperor found out before they let him die."

I always was quite unable to appreciate the glamour that hangs over the dwellers on the edge of the world; and the "Yellow Mystery" is one I trust that I may never fathom. In this I never agree with Pilkington, who has read ton-loads of fusty books, and tries to floor me with Claudius Ptolemy and Marco Polo. A sentiment handed down from the Ancients and the Mediævals, who combined limited opportunities of acquiring information, and unlimited capacities for transmitting it incorrectly, seems to me a most unreliable light by which to guide our modern intelligences.

"It's a rum thing," here put in Tralee, in the tone of a meditative sage, "how a dozen years ago everybody made out these blooming Celestials were going to swamp the whole of Europe, and now the whole show's going to perdition."

"In questions of evolution," observed the doctor, with ponderous sarcasm, "where a thousand years are as yesterday, a dozen can hardly be said to settle a whole scientific problem. A handful of centuries hence we may perhaps—"

"Oh, by the way, somebody told me," burst in Tralee, with his usual inconsequence, "that the coal supply was going to give out in about six thousand years."

"Then we can all go and live in the tropics," I remarked, rising, with the paper still in my hand. "Everything," I went on, changing the subject hastily, for Pilkington was turning to me with the evident intention of beginning a harangue, "seems to be quiet enough up north just now: what do you think of running up to have a look at the

scene of future action? review the Russian fleet, and that sort of thing?"

The doctor's face grew visibly brighter.

"I should like to take a look at Cambaluc," he said.

"You won't be able to do that. It's some miles inland, and we couldn't take the yacht up the Nan-Ming river."

"There's a chance missed!" ejaculated Tralee, "when I was making sure the Empress would fall in love with me at first sight, pretty little kitten!"

"A lucky escape, you mean," I returned. "There was a young *attaché* once—as Rudyard Kipling says. But I can't tell you about him till I've fortified my nerves with dinner."

In spite of the impossibility of obtaining a view of the termagant Empress or her capital, my suggestion was adopted, and in the course of thirty-eight hours we coasted up the edge of the world towards the scene of the land-grabbing operations of the Powers. When we passed through the straits of Kew-chow-wang we were to all appearance the only European craft in these once forbidden waters. The horizon on all sides of us was clear of man-of-war or cruiser, as far as eye or telescope could reach; there was not so much as a cloud of smoke in the distance to mark the track of a passing liner. On the other hand, the sea all round us was dotted with the unseamanlike-looking barques of Cathay, which, without making any demonstrations of unfriendliness, seemed desirous of passing us by on the other side without attracting remark. The sky was very blue and the sea was like a glassy lake. The sun stood right over the mast, as it did for the Ancient Mariner, and we lay about under an awning all day, speechless and motionless—and gracefully attired in pyjamas and sun helmets. Food seemed gross and unnecessary, and thinking made one's temperature run up

to fever heat; sleep resolved itself into rolling about all night, cursing and wishing for morning. It was hot at Can-Say, it was hot at Hong Kong, it was infernally hot at Calcutta; but one expected it. In the Straits of Kew-chow-wang in late September, the thermometer might have fallen slightly, and one felt wronged and disappointed in one's lawful expectations.

It was on the second morning after leaving Can-Say that we were roused from our trance by something occurring. I was arising from my couch of unrest in a leisurely manner, with the fixed intention of taking as many sartorial hints from the Ancient Britons as possible, when my servant knocked on my cabin door, and was heard, during the intervals of my displeased remonstrances, stating that the captain wished to speak to me. I have the greatest respect for the captain normally, but in my haste, I consigned him to an even more torrid locality than the coast of Cathay.

"If the yacht has sprung a leak, let it go down," I ordered viciously, "if the Russian fleet is offering to sink us with its biggest guns, give in quietly. If Lord Tralee has fallen overboard, don't stop for him. But whatever you do or don't do, stop jabbering at me when I'm dressing."

Whether my servant transmitted these picturesque directions to Captain Farlane or not, I have no idea, for five minutes later, equipped with little clothing and less temper, I was confronting the importunate official myself on the bridge. Without apologising for his scandalous behaviour in disturbing my toilet, he hastened to point out the reason; and I am bound to admit it was a more or less adequate reason. I sent down at once for a glass in order to see the adequacy even better.

"They've been making signals of distress at us these

ten minutes, have the gentry in that little boat," explained Captain Farlane. He is a Glasgow man, and there was a pleasant flavour of bonnie Scotland in his accent.

"At least," he added, "I am thinking they must mean all that wagging of blankets in the air as signals."

Through my glass, I discerned a small native sloop of mean aspect and tattered sail, whose crew, consisting apparently of a single hand, stood in the bows, and had removed its garment in order to wave it frantically. The passenger made a limp heap in the stern, while holding on for greater security to a bale or bundle of white material lying at his feet ; he seemed very unhappy, not to say in the last stage of maritime collapse.

"What," I asked of Captain Farlane, having made up my own mind as to my intended course of action, "shall we do ?"

"Pick them up," he promptly replied ; "they seem to *want* to be picked up."

This being my own idea exactly, I nodded. At that moment I saw Tralce, emerging from the companion, barking his shins as usual, and Pilkington's spectacled face looming out of the darkness behind him.

CHAPTER II

DE PROFUNDIS

WHEN the gig came up alongside, with the native boat in tow, Pilkington and Tralee, who had not been able to extract any satisfactory information from Farlane or myself, nearly fell overboard in their spasms of interest and curiosity. I, shutting up my field-glasses in their case, came down on deck more slowly, and, with no expectation of anything out of the common-place, I sauntered up to where Farlane already stood making inquiries of the mate, while the men hauled the wretched little skiff up to the accommodation ladder. It was a frail little vessel, extremely dirty and in the worst repair, and it seemed a marvel to have met it so far from land.

"The sea must have been like a mill-pond these last few days," remarked the captain to me, and I divined the train of his thoughts without the perspicacity of a Sherlock Holmes.

Now that the boat was alongside, we saw that its occupants were three. The unfortunate person who sat helplessly in the stern of the boat, was a Celestial of venerable appearance, so gorgeously attired that he was evidently a man of rank, improbable as it seemed. That which I had taken for a bundle of rags was a body, which lay limp and apparently lifeless at the bottom of the sloop.

The only person on this vessel able to account for himself was a sturdy-looking Celestial plainly of the lower classes, and stripped to the waist, who stepped on board with the utmost *sangfroid* and indifference. Though both captain and mate plied him with their best pidgin-English, a tongue in which both were proficient to eloquence, their efforts to extract information were vain, and the sailor, fisherman, servant, or whatever his rank and calling might be, preserved a perfect and speechless calm, his face as rigid as if it were the mahogany it resembled in colour. Then I spoke to him in his own language, pure and undefiled, as I began to learn it during my brief diplomatic career, and have studied it ever since.

I cannot say that his face brightened, for he never stirred an eyelid, but he did respond, though very unsatisfactorily. He knew where he came from—the mainland, which was vague. Where did his companion come from? He didn't know. Who was he? He didn't know. Where were they going to then? He didn't know. Were they expecting to be picked up by a passing vessel? He didn't know. Did they mean to drift indefinitely? (A wasted sarcasm.) He didn't know, it was in the hands of Heaven.

When people are as vague as this, I get wild. Nothing tries my patience like a man who does not know the reason of his own actions, and I turned from this yellow delinquent in displeasure, aggravated by the annoying behaviour of Pilkington and Tralee, who, every time the man delivered himself of his terse and unsatisfactory answers, volleyed forth a simultaneous: "What does he say?" If they had had the intellect of infants, they must have perceived that the answer was the same every time, but I have remarked, whenever I have acted as interpreter, that no one will wait for the space of a minute, or try

to exercise any intelligence of his own, with regard to an unknown language.

I wheeled round impatiently, turning my back on all three of the idiots. Just then the poor old gentleman from the stern of the boat staggered on deck; the men had helped him up the accommodation ladder with the utmost difficulty, as he seemed to have no control whatever over his limbs, and he was very heavy. His garments, once gorgeous, were drenched and stained with sea spray, and exhaled a salt odour that was far from pleasant. His face was very much withered and puckered, especially round the deep sunken eyes, and he wore a weedy grey beard, which did not add to the beauty of his appearance. He stretched his hands, loaded with heavy rings, before him in a blind, helpless way, and without any warning, fell forward in a kind of fit.

"This is inanition and exposure," explained the doctor, coming to the fore with professional alacrity, "pick him up, carry him below, and give him something to eat."

Three of the hands were just in course of obeying the first of these directions, when the old gentleman, looking up into Pilkington's face, said weakly, but distinctly, in Cathayan :

"I call you to witness that I have saved the Son of Heaven."

"What does he say?" asked Pilkington, turning to me, and, "What does he say?" bellowed Tralee, from the rail.

"Oh, some gibberish," I returned, moving forward, for now they were conveying the third gruesome passenger from the boat.

"I don't think we shall be troubled with this gentleman long," was the captain's comment, as the passive white bundle was lifted up the side.

The third passenger, like a sort of awful chrysalis, was swathed in what seemed to be a large sheet, stained, and that not only with the weather ; for here and there splashes of dark brown colour showed among the irregular folds. As they raised him, swaying to and fro, the unhappy man's head, protruding from his wrappings, swung at an angle that seemed impossible if his neck vertebræ were in place, and I think I shall not easily forget his face, as they laid him on the deck at my feet. The eyes were half-shut, the lips and jaws flecked with coagulated blood, and the whole face was twisted to one side, as if the last conscious sensation had been one of agony. The head dropped sideways as they laid him down, and we could see that the pigtail—the insignia of his race and its sovereignty—had been severed apparently with a hot iron, which had not been used with care, and had raised a line of blisters on the back of head and neck. To my inexperienced eyes he was dead, and it was on the tip of my tongue to ask how soon he had better be thrown overboard, when Pilkington came to the fore again.

Samuel had been rather distressed by the evident fact that he could be of no further use to our venerable friend, as it was practically impossible to thrust nourishment down his throat by means of a spoon, as if he were a young bird the doctor was endeavouring to rear by hand. But now things looked brighter, from a professional point of view. He knelt down by the side of the dead man, and examined him closely. Then he raised him with one hand (the poor fellow was as light as a reed), and with the other began to unroll the all-enveloping sheets. Tralee came forward and helped ; I stooped down, ashamed of my own squeamishness, and helped too.

The sheet, stained and dank, was an outer covering only. Beneath it, the dead man was swathed cocoon-like

in numerous anomalous garments, blankets, carpets, table-cloths or whatever they might be, and I thought by their aspect, that he must have bled to death. It was worse than unwrapping a mummy, but the apparently callous Pilkington persevered till he found the object of his search.

"Oh, Lord!" he ejaculated, as he lifted it by the wrist from the miscellaneous wrappings amongst which it reposed, and I confess I turned away with a feeling of deathly sickness. The hand he brought to light was not pretty to see.

I could not go on any longer with our ghastly task. I crossed over to the other side of the deck and stared at the sea, but the hand and the face stood between me and the water. Presently Pilkington came up and clapped me on the shoulder.

"He's alive," remarked Samuel, come to judgment, "and if you'll order him to be taken below, I'll pull him through."

"Take him anywhere out of my sight, for Heaven's sake!" I exclaimed, and the iron-nerved Pilkington stared. But he made no remark, only hastened to act on my suggestion. When I looked round, the tramp of the men removing our terrible passenger having died away in the direction of the companion, my eyes lighted on the stolid figure of the low-class Celestial, standing motionless and with cheerful fortitude, where I last saw him.

"What is your name?" I asked sharply, for my nerves had not recovered their equilibrium.

"Kwa-Yen, great Excellency."

"Then, Kwa-Yen, well so named, do you still assert that you do not know your travelling companions?"

"I do not know them, great Excellency."

"Was the boat yours?" I asked, starting on a new tack,

"It was, great Excellency."

"From what port?"

"From the port of Zay-ton" (the port at the mouth of the Nan-Ming river, on which the capital is situated).

"Did these people take your boat there?"

"No, Excellency, at Pe-hang, a fishing village on the coast."

This sounded to me wild.

"And was the old man carrying the dead one?" I asked.

"No, great Excellency. Both were in chairs."

More mysterious still. I began to give Kwa-Yen credit for a lively imagination.

"Then they are men of degree. Is it not strange that such should wish to use your little boat?"

There was no shaking him.

"I do not know, great Excellency. I never ask questions"—which was a decided hit at me—"one of the bearers was my brother, and he told me what I was to do."

"Where does your brother live?" I asked quickly.

"At Cambaluc, great Excellency."

"And what does he do there?"

"He is of the household of the mandarin Wu-Chow, Excellency."

This was a cul-de-sac. I saw there was no more to be got out of the stolid Kwa-Yen. If he knew more than he allowed to appear, he was obviously resolved to keep it stubbornly to himself. I hoped to get more information,—indeed I could hardly get less—when the old gentleman should have sufficiently refreshed his inner man to be interrogated. But this was not for a considerable period, as the old gentleman, on being revived with sustenance, was displeased by the condition in which he found his

habiliments, and expressed a wish to exchange them for some which had not borne the brunt of wind and weather. Needless to say, we were not provided with changes of the national costume of Cathay, and the aged gentleman raised Hades when he discovered that he must apparel himself in the garments of the despised foreigner, or content himself with those with which Nature had endowed him. At last he consented to adorn himself in pyjamas of Tralee's, as the largest and baggiest, Moorish slippers and a Homburg hat, which he bent to suit his own taste, of the doctor's, and a silk dressing-gown of my own.

In this array he came up to the deck saloon, and bowed to us with great politeness. I heard Tralee explode into his handkerchief, under pretext of blowing his nose, and Pilkington suddenly ducked his head almost between his knees, as if he saw something absorbing on the floor. I take great credit to myself for having kept my countenance admirably, as I greeted the old gentleman with a low bow, and a sweeping backward kick, which included Tralee's shins and Pilkington's pet corn, and was more effectual than graceful.

I then begged our self-invited guest to take a seat, and said that I hoped he would not consider it an impertinence if I asked his honourable name.

He replied that his trivial appellation was unworthy my august notice, but that as a matter of fact it was Wu-Chow, and promptly asked my name. What, he wanted to know, was my honourable country, and where was I going? What was my income? Was I a prince when I was at home, or a great general? Was I married or a bachelor? and how old? In fact, he was just like a census paper.

I knew that he meant the height of politeness, and was answering without an attempt at concealment, when interrupted by Pilkington and Tralee, who recovered

from their laughter with their old yell of "What does he say?"

"Now look here!" I exclaimed, turning round savagely, "if you fellows can't hold your confounded tongues—"

"It's all right," returned Tralee soothingly; "only tell us what he says."

"I'll tell you when it's worth telling," I decreed automatically, "and if you don't ask the moment the words are out of his mouth. Otherwise I shan't tell you a d---- syllable."

For my temper, not generally good, had been much tried.

"All right, all right," repeated Tralee, "it's only the interest we take in you, my boy."

Tralee usually spoils the effect of his blarney by a grin. I answered by a scowl, and turned back to my mandarin. Before, however, I could tackle that aged searcher after the truth on the question of his doings in an open boat under these strange circumstances, he exploded afresh with a full charge of inquiries concerning my companions. I answered these all with an exemplary patience, restraining with my eye Tralee and Pilkington, who became most restless and excited on hearing their own names. Then, Wu-Chow having relapsed into silence, I broke in with my own inquiries. I told him that he had made a preposterous, and I trusted a delirious, statement on coming aboard; he became obviously uneasy, and asked in a troubled tone what it was. I told him, and he looked relieved. I wondered at once what the old villain had in his mind.

"It is true," he observed complacently. "I, a humble person, have delivered the Son of Heaven into your august keeping."

"I hope you are speaking metaphorically," I remarked;

"because, otherwise, you mean that one of the two persons you brought on board with you is the Emperor of Cathay."

"You are right now, as always," he replied. "Hwang-te (the Ruler of the Yellow) is at this moment honouring your noble vessel."

The old gentleman got rather mixed in his endeavours to speak of my floating possession in laudatory terms, and at the same time to impress me with the honour it was receiving. I translated his remarks to my companions.

"This old bounder's a liar," said Tralee promptly.

"Would you mind," I said to Wu-Chow, with polite incredulity, "accounting to me for this very strange story, which seems to me slightly improbable?"

"I will very gladly tell you the whole matter," replied the old gentleman, much pleased. He pulled my dressing-gown more closely round him, and started off at a hand-canter; he was delighted to find an audience for a recital of his deeds, which he evidently considered very fine.

"It was Sung-Taou that was the cause of all the mischief," he began. "All things had been going well for many seasons, and Teen-tze (the Son of Heaven) walked in the way of his ancestors, and followed the wisdom of K'ung-fu-tze. The people were happy, the Court was tranquil, the ministers made money, and what more could you wish? Then came Sung-Taou, who passed the years of his life among foreigners, and learnt to think irreverently of aged men and their knowledge. He came; and because his father was a man of influence, and because his grandfather had been much esteemed by late emperors many years in the past, he was made a secretary of the Council of State. Afterwards, he was presented to the Son of Heaven,

and Ta-tsing (the Great Pure One) was pleased with him, for Sung-Taou was a gay fellow, playing strange instruments and singing strange songs, like the mountebank he was. His tricks amused the Son of Heaven, and he extended his gracious favour to him, so Sung-Taou became a Ta-jin, and devised a plot and conspiracy in his evil heart. He had been in the West many years, and learnt the Western ~~magic~~ and the Western tongues, and he talked to the Great Pure One when none was by to hear, and told him cunning tales, which Kwang-Seu (the Succession of Glory) believed. Then the Child of the Stars asked for books, which he had always spurned, even from his boyhood, and read and studied all day, caring no longer for the ~~drama~~, or for the men that sang, and the women that danced. And Sung-Taou gave him evil books, that are not among the Nine Classics, and taught him to read as the foreigners read, without reverence and without belief."

"This Sung-Taou seems to have been a progressive sort of Johnny," remarked Tralee when I translated this.

"After all this," proceeded Wu-Chow, much interested in his own narrative, "the Son of Heaven began to ask of his Council questions which they were much embarrassed to answer; and Kieu-Ching, the head of the Board of Punishments, and Yung-She, which is over the War Office, were in especial very much angered, and swore they would destroy the man who had put it into the heart of the Son of Heaven to shame his councillors. But none knew who it was that had turned the face of his favour from them at that time, nor for a long while after, for Sung-Taou was a subtil man. Howsoever, the Succession of Glory was mightily displeased with the answers which his councillors made to his questions, and they could not satisfy him with all their wisdom and cunning; for he believed no man, save Sung-Taou only. Now, about the time of the

spring equinox, the son of a great king in Europe came to Zay-ton in a ship of war and had audience of the Son of Heaven. And this was the first time that the sons of the kings of Europe were permitted so to do. At this time, Sung-Taou, who had passed several years in the country of this king's son, and could speak with the same tongue, had much speech with the people of the king's son, barbarians with red beards and long legs, who smoked great pipes and spoke like the grunting of swine. So Sung-Taou returned to Cambaluc, with his heart filled with evil by the sound of the foreign tongue which he had heard.

"There are four nations which have cast their eyes on Cathay to see her desirability and to divide her among themselves," resumed Wu-Chow, deviating from the main path of his recital. "There is the tall nation from the North West, whose words are as the hissing of serpents, and who say they are of kin to the race of the Great Dragon. There is the great nation from the South West, of which you come, that bring gifts in their hands, and that taught us to smoke the foul Black Smoke. There is also another nation; that fought with us, too, in years past, little men, and without dignity, who speak with their hands. And there is the nation of the king's son, of whom we have seen none before. All these are separate nations," he condescended to inform us, "and Sung-Taou could speak the languages of all four."

"Sung-Taou was distinctly accomplished," commented Pilkington, on hearing this interpreted.

"Sung-Taou," resumed Wu-Chow, "returned to Cambaluc, and breathed all the noisome words he had heard into the ear of the Son of Heaven, and because Ta-Ming (the Great Bright One) loved Sung-Taou, the words sounded sweet in his ears. Afterwards the Son of Heaven called

together his Council in the Purple Forbidden City, and bade them publish his will in many evil edicts. There was an edict that foreigners should be Chiang-Chun and Tu-T'ung¹ in the army, and there was a decree that foreigners should build ships in room of those that were destroyed in the last great war; and there was an ordinance that there should be public periodicals even as with the foreigners, and worst of all, that the examiners should cease to examine the yearly candidates in the Sacred Classics, and should instead ask them questions on common matters of little account."

"That means practical things instead of fusty old books dating from 2000 B.C.," I explained; "very sensible of Sung-Taou, I call it, and I admire the Emperor for appreciating him."

"At this," proceeded Wu-Chow, "there was great perturbation among the Council, for they perceived that matters would not stop there, but that more was to come; and soon all that was good and ancient would be swept away, and all that was new and bad brought forward, and the land laid at the feet of the foreigners. So they took counsel among themselves, and determined that these things should not be. Then the great bright Prince Yih, that is uncle to the Ruler of the Yellow, counselled them that they should first find out who it was who had devised those edicts. For none supposed that the Son of Heaven had thought of them for himself. But the Council tried for many days to discover who had seduced the Son of Heaven from the path of his ancestors, and I tried also, being one of the Council. When we found nothing, we determined to place the matter in the hands of the Dowager Empress Ah-Seu. Now the Dowager Empress is a great woman and very subtil. When the Son of Heaven

¹ Chiang-Chun and Tu-T'ung—two highest military titles.

was young and tender, he was in her care, because his mother was a soft and foolish woman; wherefore the Son of Heaven respected the Dowager Empress much and feared her greatly. So it fell out that one day when the Great Pure One was making a formal visit to the imperial Ah-Seu, she asked very suddenly who had bewitched him? whether it were Sung-Taou, speaking his name with others. And being a woman of wit, she saw the Son of Heaven grow confused when she spoke of Sung-Taou, and she knew that he was the man. Wherefore she told the Council, and doubtless the Son of Heaven warned Sung-Taou, for he fled for his life. Nevertheless, the messengers of the Council were very swift, and he was taken in a boat on the Nan-Ming river and slain."

I felt quite depressed at coming to so abrupt an end of the worthy Sung-Taou; plainly he had fallen as much a martyr as any stubborn heretic to the Inquisition, and probably in quite as painful a manner.

"But before he died," went on Wu-Chow, "he bribed a eunuch, who came to the Purple Forbidden City, and told the Son of Heaven. Then Ta-Lung (the Great Dragon) fell into a mighty rage, and cursed the Council, and swore that every man of them all should die. Moreover, of the Empress Ah-Seu spoke he many dread and fearful words, and swore that she too should be slain. And all that he said was told the Empress. Now the Empress is a great woman, as wise as a serpent and as terrible as a drawn sword. She cared for nothing but for the honour of the Empire; yea, she slew her own son, because he dragged the honour of Cathay in the dirt. She knew that the Council were good men and wise, and that Sung-Taou was foolish and evil; therefore it was for the good of Cathay that the Son of Heaven should ascend on high. So in that same hour, she sent two eunuchs

to surprise the Son of Heaven in his private chamber, and to bring him bound before the Council. Now, we of the Council were desirous that he should be slain quickly ; but the Empress swore that for each of the evil things he had said of her, she would devise a fresh torture, and that finally he should be burned with hot irons till he died. So first she shamed him before us, by severing the plait of his hair, and then. . . . ”

But I do not feel bound to repeat, word for word, all the horrors which Wu-Chow proceeded to detail with the utmost placidity. I admit that the recital of these fiendish ingenuities of a brutal woman turned me perfectly sick, and I declined to interpret any longer. Only I could not interrupt Wu-Chow, or he would probably have been offended and have refused to finish his story ; and I wanted to hear how he got into the little boat. So while the length of sickening description drew along, I endured as best I could.

“ On the second day,” came at last, “ when the Son of Heaven swooned at a touch, the Empress began to fear that he would not live to the end. Wherefore she gave orders to the tormentors that they should cease from their work till the following day. Then the Prince Yih came to me and said : ‘ The Empress is old and doubtless may not live long. But the Son of Heaven is young.’ Then said I, ‘ True. But the grandson of Prince Chang is younger still, being an infant, and it is he that will reign when the Great Pure One is a guest in heaven.’ Then said Prince Yih :

“ ‘ When an infant is on the throne, the Empress will reign indeed. But if the Son of Heaven escaped from her hands, he might return, and doubtless he would hold in high honour the man that saved him.’ Then I, seeing whereto his words would lead : ‘ But the messengers

of the Empress are swift, and her wit is very keen.' Then he said : ' You have a day and a night, and little steamer-boats run up and down the river at all hours. The eunuchs of the palace have hands which can hold taels.¹ Also I am the Chamberlain of the Purple Pavilion, and to-day I am blind.' So I listened to him."

I may here remark that I did not believe one word of this conversation to be true. I could not fathom the motives which caused Wu-Chow to risk his life in a wild attempt to save that of his Emperor ; but he must have had reasons of his own. Possibly he was out of favour with the Empress Ah-Seu. Perhaps he wanted to divert attention from some private bit of iniquity. Perhaps Prince Yih, who was said to be a humane and enlightened man, bribed him (I afterwards discovered that Wu-Chow had an astonishing amount of ready cash) ; but it was not from a lofty ideal of devotion and self-sacrifice ; of that I was certain.

"So," went on the history, "I entered the room where the Son of Heaven had been left . . . alone, who had never been alone since he ruled in Cathay as a little child . . . and he knew me, though he was very weak, and sobbed out : ' Oh, Wu-Chow, give me a cushion for my back . . . I am very tired.' So I cut the cords on his wrists, and I wrapped him in silk and linen clothes, and I carried him—for he is not heavy—through the door, and into the antechamber where the Prince Yih was waiting. Then together we placed him in a chair and drew down the blinds, and called the eunuchs to carry the chair to the quarters of the concubines. But afterwards they were told to carry it to my house ; and this lest any should follow the chair and suspect what was therein. For the quarters of the concubines are very vast, and one might enter by

¹ Tael—equivalent to 3s. 4d.

one door, and depart by another, and none be wiser. And therein other eunuchs were to take the chair, and bring it to my house.

"Now all the eunuchs had received many taels that they should do this thing and say nothing, and they might think what they pleased. At my house, my own servants took the chair" (this was evidently where Kwa-Yen's brother came in), "and carried it to the river; and I too was carried in another chair. And at the quay we found a little steamer-boat that had foreigners in command, and we steamed down the river to Zay-ton, reaching it at sunset. After that, I took another steamer-boat somewhat smaller and went to within a little distance of the coast, where I landed and caused the servants to carry the chairs overland to a little village called Pe-hang; for one of my servants had kin there which owned boats. This," explained Wu-Chow, "was to throw the pursuers off the scent, for they would surely suppose that I should convey the Son of Heaven away in a foreign steamer-boat rather than in a common fishing vessel. Howbeit," he added with a sudden naïveté, "there was no steamer-boat of Zay-ton that could be hired to go forth into the open sea, save for a very great price, as of the weight of them in gold."

"So as far as I can make out," remarked Pilkington, on hearing the translation, "he risked killing his Emperor by exposure, not to mention the hundred-to-one chance of being captured by a native vessel, while he was supposed to be saving his life. A queer upside-down sort of way to do it!"

"The boat which I took at Pe-hang," remarked Wu-Chow, "which belonged to Kwa-Yen, is a very slow boat. Wherefore, though we have been on the face of the waters two nights and a day, we have progressed but little on our

journey. Moreover, a very evil fortune has attended us, and yours is the first foreign vessel we have seen in all these hours, though of our own we have passed and been passed by many, and a hand gripped me by the vitals each time. And I think this is all the story. But the Son of Heaven is saved (although I was sorely afraid he would die in the little boat), and I did it alone, and none helped me."

He looked round, beaming with pride and gorgeously oblivious of the humble but essential parts taken in the undertaking by his servants and by Kwa-Yen. Meanwhile, it must not be supposed that I at once comprehended the whole of this long recital as fluently as I have written it down. But, in days to come, Wu-Chow repeated it so often that I got to know it by heart. In the light of a closer knowledge of his character, I have come to the conclusion that he had to escape from Cathay because he was the Court bore.

"But tell me," I began, "you appear to have intended from the first to be picked up by a foreign vessel of some kind? But what did you propose to do after that?"

He was entirely hazy as to this point.

"Then what do you expect me to do?" I asked.

Oh as to that, the Son of Heaven was in my noble hands. I might return him to the affectionate kinsfolk waiting for him at Cambaluc, but Wu-Chow did not think it would be in accordance with my august nature to do so.

"Well, of course I have to satisfy myself about that. I'm not going to have a row on the word of a lying Celestial," I remarked to my companions.

"Quite right," agreed Pilkington, and Tralee wagged his head wisely.

Wu-Chow seemed to guess my doubt.

"Very little was I able to save from the Purple Forbidden City," he remarked, "so that the Son of Heaven should not go forth in unbecoming wise. I would have carried away much had it been possible, that even among the foreigners, the Great Bright One should have the state that is his due. But all I could bear in my hands was a trifle of money which the Prince Yih gave me for the use of the Son of Heaven, and the imperial ring of Cathay which the Dowager Empress gave into my hands when the torturing began."

He held out in his palm a great heavy ring of gold, set with one immense ruby; the gold was engraved with Cathayan characters, and the jewel looked a barbaric thing altogether, but the stone was undoubtedly fine. I took it in my hand, trying to make out the characters, and to remember if I had ever seen it before, but in both efforts I was unsuccessful.

"I keep it," remarked Wu-Chow, watching me with a jealous eye, "till the Son of Heaven can wear it again. Where it goes, the life of Cathay goes too, and if it were lost, Cambaluc would fall, and the Dragon Throne come to ruin."

I gave it him back, lest these dire things should come to pass through my instrumentality.

"Do you suppose," I asked, "that your flight is known at Cambaluc?"

"I have reckoned with myself," he returned composedly, "and the messengers of the Empress that are pursuing us will have reached the coast at nightfall yesterday. But they will have no suspicion of a little sailing vessel."

"But supposing they want to search *us*?" I inquired.

"Then you must on no account permit it," answered Wu-Chow, with much calm.

"Meanwhile we're rushing on Zay-ton at twelve knots

an hour," burst in Tralee; "don't you think we'd better right about face?"

Before I could answer this sound suggestion, a seaman appeared at the open door of the deck saloon.

"Please, sir, would you speak to the cap'en a moment?"

CHAPTER III

SCYLLA

IT was about four o'clock in the afternoon when we received the captain's summons, and we all instantly went up and joined him on the bridge, Wu-Chow coming too, with wonderful agility. It was at once evident why Farlane had desired speech of me. I had not been up on deck since luncheon, and indeed had been far too much absorbed in Wu-Chow's veracious recitals to pay any attention to the aspect of things on the briny. Now, however, the panorama to which Farlane drew my notice, by a silent but expressive gesture, gave me food for much reflection.

When last I inspected the outlook, nothing had been visible but the sea itself (an inconsiderable item), and a few junks in the offing. Now a positive flotilla of the obsolete-looking vessels met the eye, to whichever side turned. In itself the mere fact of their numbers might not have been appalling, but when, by means of my glass, I discovered that their heads were all turned towards us, it struck me with a sinister significance.

"No, I don't half like the look of 'em," so Farlane answered my glance at him, "and look there!"

He pointed forward, and up went my glass again. There, fortunately still at a considerable distance, I discerned

three vessels of more formidable calibre than the junks, (cruisers, I think, but I am not good at maritime nomenclature), bearing down upon us, slowly but unmistakably. At that moment, Wu-Chow made an ejaculation behind me. I turned hastily, and saw that he was looking through a telescope with remarkable contortions of visage.

"I see ships of war!" he exclaimed, "they are all that are left us since the men of Niphon fell on us in the matter of the North-East Peninsula. Ah, and I see the flag-ship! It is commanded by Lew-Fung, the great mathematician; we are all dead men!"

And with this cheering ejaculation, he sat down then and there, and began to say his prayers.

Then I caught Tralee's eye.

"What?" began that importunate Irishman.

Wheeling round, I hastily gave a *résumé* of Wu-Chow's story to Farlane; he listened without interruption, only punctuating my sentences by occasional grave nods.

"But I'm not at all sure I believe in it," I finished.

"I do," said the captain gravely.

"So do I, by the Lord Harry," ejaculated Tralee. "What do all these jossers mean, if it's not mischief? *Look at 'em, will you?*"

I did stare at them once more through my field glass, and then gazed dismally and helplessly at Farlane; I wished with all my heart that the *Flosshilde* was a line-of-battle-ship, and remembered with regret having heard that the *Hohenzollern* had guns. It was obvious that the "jossers" as Tralee indiscriminately called them, had sinister designs, and it was quite possible that Wu-Chow and his mangled companion were fugitive criminals, or even persons of political importance, without being the

high and mighty powers of the earth that unreliable old gentleman had represented them to be. Things looked very ugly.

Most heartily did I wish that I had never hit on the plan of coming up to inspect the place where history was being made ; or that when there, I had not been overcome by an indiscreet generosity leading me to pick up the forlorn little boat. Oh that I had known that it was freighted with such issues !

"Well, we must run for it, I suppose," I remarked despondently.

"I would as soon not be boarded by any of these yellow brutes, with devil a European in hail. But it's your affair, Mr. Randolph, of course," returned Farlane, with well-simulated indifference.

Now it was easy to talk of running for it, with a superior consciousness of machinery in the best of working order ; but it was less easy to find a point of the compass which was not held by those evidently hostile craft. At first, they had been circling round us in irregular rings of greater or less circumference ; now they were massing themselves together in groups, as if they expected us to make a bolt for it, and were preparing to resist our effort by sheer weight of numbers. To me, who knew nothing of such matters, the outlook of affairs in general was excessively unpleasant. If an European vessel of any sort, size, or description, had been within the whole sweep of the horizon, I should have felt less downhearted, for if we had had an entire prison-full of escaped malefactors aboard, these cowardly Celestials would hardly attack us, with men of our own skin within sight. I made a mental note that, if ever I saw dear old England again, I would not brave the dangers of the deep again without having the yacht fitted up with one

or more guns. Amid these far from cheery reflections, it was as the shadow of a great rock in a thirsty land to look at Captain Farlane. That great man stood like a monument of calm and assurance, a cheery smile shining through his beard like a beacon in a fog ; his steady eye looked a mental vision unclouded by doubt or fear. It inspired me with more confidence to watch him than Tralee, with his chin in the air trying to make himself look even taller than he was as a defiance to the enemy ; for Farlane knew the Celestial and his works. His was not the courage of ignorance. Pilkington soon got tired of inaction, and went below to look after his patient ; Wu-Chow waddled off to pursue his devotions elsewhere.

We slewed slowly round till we could see the outermost of the three cruisers (if they *were* cruisers) on our port bow. Forward the Celestials stood out to sea in ranks, and astern of them, somewhere beyond that hopeless offing, there must have been the Russian squadron, which might be friendly, but, on the other and more probable hand, might not, and which in any case was quite out of reach. Now the hostile Mongols seemed to be absolutely still, lying in the trough of the waves and waiting, as vultures might wait for a beast of superior kidney whose hours are numbered. Our engines seemed almost to have stopped. Astern the sun stood, as it appeared, a hand's breadth above the skyline, a copper ball balancing itself on a sheet of burnished steel. The tawny sea running in little chopping waves between us and our waiting foes, wrapped us in an isolation that was more terrible than the most Sahara-like solitude. We pitched, as if we were balancing in the scales of Fate.

It was not a moment to talk, and in the silence I could hear the tap-tapping of our deck-chairs as the yacht pitched,

or the shuddering flap of the awning as its edge caught the wind; the moaning creaks and whistlings aloft, or the muttering voices of the men in the fo'c'sle; the skirl of a sea-bird miles up in ether, and the bellowings of Wu-Chow, as he prayed loudly in the deck saloon. Nay, in the tense strain of a highly strung nervous organisation, I could perceive the salt savour of the wind as it hovered low over the brazen waves, and fancy it was burdened with the Far Eastern smell of mud, opium, and yellow humanity, that offended my nostrils at Can-Say, or—and this, indeed, was bathos—the savoury smell of the dinner we might not be alive to eat, cooking stolidly in the galley. There was little enough of romance in our position, or of anything which the most feeble poetic imagination could dwell on with a glow of rapture. Yet it did not seem in the fitness of things that the spell cast on sea and sky should be broken by the prosaic voice of Pilkington.

"Well," remarked the man of medicine, appearing with the suddenness of a Jack-in-the-box, "how are things going?"

"Oh, nohow," I said crossly. The captain made some remark, couched in the most technical of language, down his speaking-tube to an invisible confederate apparently in the engine-room. Pilkington examined the sea (like Lear's young lady of Portugal) by turns through each of the available spy-glasses..

"They've knocked that poor little beggar about infernally, emperor or no emperor," he remarked presently; "been most punctilious not to leave him a sound limb, in fact. I think I can pull him through; but I expect it will be months before he has the nerve of a corby crow."

(Though fairly well instructed in natural history, I have

no acquaintance with this bird, which I gravely suspect of existing only in Pilkington's private zoology.)

"I wish," he resumed, "that they'd been more sparing of hot irons. If they had limited themselves to carving him about with knives, or even hatchets, or even if they had tried to saw him in half, it wouldn't have mattered anything like as much. But when you start burning to the bone with red-hot——"

"Now look here, Samuel," I said firmly, "I don't want to hear any details of the remarkably nasty way in which your patient has been treated. I know exactly what they did to him. I had a circumstantial account of each separate process from Wu-Chow, and the subject is one I am at no time fond of. I daresay if you wait patiently a few more hours——"

"Of course," said Pilkington solemnly, "he'll never lose the scars nor——"

"If you wait patiently a few more hours," I repeated piercingly, "you and all the rest of us will be in a position to furnish first-hand information on the tortures of Cathay."

"Is it as bad as all that?" asked Pilkington of Farlane.

"Well, we must hope for the best, Doctor Pilkington," returned that discreet mariner.

"Well," said the doctor after a moment, with stoical resignation, "*che sara, sara.* I'm not doing any good up here—no more are you, Randolph, except to make yourself nervous—I'll go below again."

None of us, I am certain, care'd if he went or stayed, so long as he left us to pursue our watch. His presence, with its philosophical calm, had a most irritating effect on my jangled nerves ; it was as if one drew a bow, no matter how softly, across a violin string strained

overmuch. I welcomed the silence which fell, like a curtain, on his exit.

Almost imperceptibly, as it seemed, we had moved round three points of the compass, and stood with our head due east. We were pitching and rolling both at the same time, a motion which might have seemed unpleasant if one had had time to think about it. Astern the sun hung as it were two fingers' breadths from the sea, which flowed up towards it in a broad pathway of shimmering bronze.

Up against the red sky stood the three cruisers, as it were three finger-posts pointing to battle, murder, and sudden death. Just beyond rifle-range the weird Celestial barques waited patiently—the foul death birds. Little sighing airs rose from the heart of the golden waves, and played dirge-like among the rigging as on the strings of a harp ; between water and ether, droned the monotonous sea sounds, tuned in a minor key. In the lurid light, the inimical ships in the distance, the masts and rigging of the *Flosshilde*, even the figures of my two prosaic companions looked phantom-like. A gull, beating the air noiselessly above our heads, seemed a strange sea-spirit.

As my nerve fibre wore thin, I felt I should become a maniac, if I stood any longer watching that spectre-like panorama. With an effort of will that was positively physical, I turned away and went down on deck ; the boards shimmered before my face like spirally winding snakes in the half-light, as the yacht pitched. I plunged into the comparative darkness of the companion with a feeling of relief from brain tension.

As I switched on the electric light in my state-room, I took out my watch. I lit a cigarette, and looked about for a mouthpiece ; it was borne in upon me that only the

most elongated of those possessions would be of any comfort to me at this moment. I found it after some search, and then went over to the little bookcase over my bed. It contained few books, and passages from each started up in my mind to convince me that I knew every one by heart. I hooked my finger into the binding of "Marcus Aurelius," when my thoughts flew to another *soi-disant* imperial personage.

Pushing "Marcus Aurelius" back, I opened the door with one hand and switched off the light with the other; in another minute I was running into Pilkington in his patient's doorway.

"Can I come in and look at him?" I asked, with a vagueness that was only apparent.

"If you like," returned Pilkington indifferently, "only don't touch him, or he'll yell."

I slid inside the door, with the sort of elaborate caution that one instinctively assumes in sickrooms, when one is totally unaccustomed to them. The patient looked as much like a mummy as when he arrived on board and lay as prone and motionless; only his head moved now and again on the pillow, and weak coughs and soft moans alternately escaped him.

"His lungs are touched," remarked Pilkington stolidly. "I'm not surprised either, if half the old Wu-Chow cove told us was true. This is a sickly little beggar."

"Is he light-headed?" I asked.

"I think so; he's spoken once or twice, but of course I wouldn't understand what he said."

I went a little nearer and looked into the sick man's face. I was glad to see it again, to wipe out the memory of it as I saw it before, distorted and ghastly. Now it merely looked weak and vacant, with eyes and mouth half

open and cheeks fallen in. There was something pitiful in the look, as of a child that has been ill-used, and the breath came unevenly, as if in little sobs. I give the first-fruits of my worshipful respect to courage, but anything small and weak and incapable flies straight to the softest spot in my heart. In my first impulse of pity for this miserable little Celestial, I recalled my regret at having picked him up; at least the poor fellow would die in comfort.

He rolled his head round towards me, and opened his eyes; then he said half a dozen words in the Tartar tongue, and I jumped.

My memory is treacherous. It deceives and misleads me as to faces, blotting them out as from a slate, or silhouetting them for no known purpose against a background of uncertainty. But with regard to voices, it never plays me false. I never forget or mistake the spoken sound. So at those few words—of a language I can only speak haltingly—I knew instantly that part, at any rate, of Wu-Chow's incredible story was true, and that the wretched little mutilated creature lying bound with bandages in my state-room was his Celestial Majesty Chin-Wang, Emperor of Cathay, and ruler of a third of the human race.

Years ago, when I figured among the *Corps diplomatique* which had audience of the Emperor at Cambaluc, I heard the Imperial voice in a short speech of acknowledgment to the address presented by the representatives of the Powers, and I remembered it at once. Indeed, I do not think my achievement so phenomenal, for the Cathayan Emperor spoke with a peculiar impediment in his speech, that was easy to recognise. It was not exactly a stammer, though it bore something of the appearance of one, as if the Imperial tongue caught on the rough

edges of certain consonants, and tripped over the smooth corners of occasional vowels. I turned at once to Pilkington.

"Samuel," I exclaimed, "the old man didn't lie! This is the Emperor of Cathay."

"Sure?" questioned the doctor.

"I'll swear to him anywhere," I replied confidently: "no two men in the whole East speak Tartar with just that stutter."

"Well, it's a very queer affair," remarked Pilkington.

"It's the most wildly improbable thing I ever heard of in my life," I returned; "but truth is stranger than fiction. There is no doubt a lot to be yet solved, and a lot we may never get to the bottom of. But the initial fact is still there."

Pilkington came and stood beside me, looking anxiously at his patient, who had apparently dropped off to sleep in the interim.

"I've had a deal of ambition in my time," he remarked whimsically, "and imagined myself doing lots of out-of-the-way things. But I don't think my imagination ran riot to the extent of supposing I should ever be physicking an emperor of Cathay."

"I thought I had touched the beam of the remarkable events in my life, when I saw him three paces away for a quarter of an hour," I remarked.

"Well, I hope the poor little beggar will die quietly and comfortably," returned Pilkington with a sigh.

"Die? Do you think he's going to die?" I asked quickly.

"I shouldn't be surprised," said Samuel, in a dry tone, "and a good job too, if he'll only make haste and get it over."

"Why?"

"Well, wouldn't you sooner have his corpse to give back to his friends yonder?"

"I'll never give him back to those fiends of hell, dead or alive!" I ejaculated.

"Then what—"

Samuel's words underwent abrupt interruption. We were standing in the passage outside the state-room as we spoke, when there reached us the sound of shouting voices and the thunderous tramp of feet over our heads. Then we heard the throb of the engines, seeming to shake the whole yacht, as with the bounding of some mighty pulse. The hurrying scuffle above us increased; there rose shrill and clamorous a sudden tornado of harsh alien voices, a roar of bass, the sharp report of a revolver. Then came a shock which made the whole yacht stagger, which threw Pilkington against me and myself on to the door of the state-room, while the hanging electric lamps in the passage danced like mad things. Without a word I turned and rushed up the companion in three flying leaps. I felt Pilkington's hot breath in my ear as I landed on deck.

The sun's lower limb touched the sea. On our port bow one of the junks lay heeling over, while further astern another of these luckless vessels was settling down, and the crews of both, as well as of a third hastening up on the starboard side, were screeching with the full raucous strength of their yellow lungs. As to us, we were going full steam ahead, and as I dashed up, Tralee caught my arm, roaring in my ear:

"Get out the family blunderbuss, old man! There's an enlightened Johnny taking pot-shots at us with a bow and arrows, by the powers!"

I made a record broad jump to the side to view this archaic survival, but I was just too late. As I hurtled

from space against the rail, the last of the ill-fated junk disappeared amid the whirl of the waters; with the sanguine archer clinging to her in a death grapple. Above me I could see the ever imperturbable figure of the captain, with a smoking six-shooter in his hand.

And the sun went down as if with a crash.

CHAPTER IV

CHARYBDIS

OUR one idea after these episodes was to get away from the scene of action with all the swiftness possible ; so we steamed away into the darkness at the largest number of knots an hour of which our engines were capable. Behind us, we left a round dozen of his Celestial Majesty's subjects struggling in the sea, and, I hoped, getting largely drowned. Before us, there was an alarming number of hours until we could fairly consider ourselves safe from the offchance of ghastly occurrences resulting from successful pursuit. So we galloped through the waves, like a seahorse of a new and peculiar pattern.

By dinner-time, we were well out in the open sea, and could slow down again. Afterwards, with that expansion of soul which dinner alone can give to the satiated, I privately confessed to Tralee how many qualifications of a brave man I lacked ; I don't think I would have admitted it to Pilkington, but Tralee's bump of scorn is not so highly developed.

"I don't mind telling you, Tralee, old man," I remarked impressively, "that I was in the bluest of blue funks a few hours ago !"

"Were you?" asked Tralee, "I thought it was rather a lark."

"A sort of lark you can have all my share of, my boy. I know what these Celestials are."

"Of course, we'd have blown them out of the water, if they'd tried to be nasty," he went on serenely.

"Blown them out of the water? What with?"

"Oh, hang it all, we've something more useful on board than bows and arrows. I don't think Farlane thought there was any danger," said Tralee, in a reassuring tone.

"They must have managed the affair very badly," commented; "I suppose they made their usual mistake of failing to combine. These people might sweep the whole world from the Pacific to the Atlantic and round again, if they knew their own strength. What fools Governments are!"

"They are," confirmed Tralee; "a Government invented Home Rule."

Here Pilkington came up.

"One would think," he remarked, taking up the patable, lying back in his deck chair, and stretching his legs out, from which oratorical attitude he addressed the stars, "one would think that though individuals are supposed to learn nothing from the experience of others, whole nations might learn something from history. They might in all these centuries have invented some way to make it leave off repeating itself. Surely every child knows that disunion spells rottenness. Does one need to read the histories of Greece and Rome, Spain and India? Can't one see what is going on every day?"

"Every child may see," I returned, "but it doesn't follow that every child will come to the same conclusion."

"Then you can read the histories again, and see the answer which has been given over and over again to the same question. When has a nation been happiest and most prosperous? Was it when it was the plaything of every demagogue that chose to get up on a tribune? Look

at France, look at Greece, look at the South American Republics."

Tralee gave a peaceful snore.

"A republic," resumed Pilkington, "can never rise above mediocrity. The States . . . a fine child of its age. When it's half as old again, it will either be part of the Anglo-Saxon Empire, or it will be running down hill a little faster than it ran up!"

"It is a lovely night," I said contemplatively, watching the stars paling beyond the red tip of my cigar.

"The only rational form of government is a benevolent despotism," rejoined Pilkington.

It was insulting those pale, far-away worlds of light to smoke impudently up into their faces; a sacrilege to defile the perfumed night with the stench of a common Havana.

"Tell the Emperor," I murmured, "he'll be pleased to hear it."

The steely sky of day had deepened into the darkest sapphire. The line of horizon had melted away into nothingness. The moon was a little slender curve that shed no light at all.

"But everything is corruptible," presently said Pilkington, with much profoundness.

"And he heard, as the roar of a rainfed ford, the roar of the Milky Way," I replied darkly.

That was the Great Bear over against us; nice to be still in latitudes where one could see the Great Bear. I should break my neck if I tried to look at Orion. They didn't teach me astronomy well when I was young; I am never perfectly sure if I know the Pole Star or not. Isn't that the Dog Star that seems to twinkle alternately red and green like a railway signal?

"But as with individuals, so with nations," resumed

Samuel, "and the 'Survival of the Fittest' is a law of Nature."

"Or-r-r-r-nk," snored Tralee, in a long-drawn manner.

How well the old Bear was looking! Who said he had lost a star out of his tail? A light fleecy cloud drifted across the sky like a veil of gossamer. Down below curling phosphorescent snakes writhed along the waters. I was just thinking how much better I could see it all with my eyes shut—

"Look, there's a shooting star," said Pilkington, dropping platitudes.

"Let it shoot," I murmured.

I was sinking through dark clouds of the most encircling softness; an angel voice was singing the most soothing lullaby in the richest key; a comfortable blank blackness was coiling all round me, blotting out time and sense. . . .

"There it is again. It must be lightning," the clear voice of Pilkington shrilled, cleaving oblivion like a sharp knife.

The man was becoming a nuisance. I sat up with a jerk.

"There!" he exclaimed.

A cold hand clutched my backbone.

"Lightning be hanged!" I ejaculated, and the note in my voice broke Tralee's slumbers like a bugle call. "That is a search-light!"

Again it passed over the heavens, that baleful streak of luminous light, like the spoke of a wheel of adverse fortune. The next moment it would be sweeping the sea. The dread of signs and portents surged thick round my heart and buzzed in my ears. I clawed wildly for my glass, (which wasn't there); Tralee rolled over in his chair, and rose to his feet slowly; Pilkington seemed to have got a

glass (possibly mine), and had moved down aft. Then we suddenly stood revealed in the full focus of the stinging light. My sensation was that which I could imagine feeling on the Day of Judgment, when it is said the thoughts of all hearts shall be revealed ; moreover, I felt that I was, unsuspected by all, a secret blackguard.

"They've found us," said Farlane's voice at my elbow. We all four stared through glasses (I had found mine at last) down the pathway of the light. There behind the offing lay no such antagonists as those we encountered a few hours before ; no clumsy contrivance of a prehistoric age, but the youngest child of deadly science, equipped with all the armoury of latter-day civilisation.

"She'll be a Russian," surmised Farlane ; "nothing else could get there from that quarter at this time."

"And I should guess from her appearance that she's come across some of our Celestial friends. Both she and they palpably know whom we have got on board and mean to make us give him up," said Pilkington.

"Then we've got to run for it again?" I hazarded.

Farlane shrugged his shoulders.

"What's the good of that? She's got a first-class torpedo-boat with her."

Pilkington scribbled hieroglyphics on a bit of paper.

"I calculate," he presently announced, "that it will take a torpedo-boat—going eighteen and a half knots an hour (which is a very fair allowance)—till about six o'clock in the morning to come within range of us. Now it's a moral impossibility that before six o'clock we can get within hail of a British vessel."

They all paused as if waiting for my decision.

"What do you want me to say?" I asked dully.

I thought they looked at each other as if to ask : "Is this man a fool?"

"Once for all," I said firmly, "I won't give up the Emperor to Russians."

"Then what do you propose to do with him?" asked Pilkington.

"Why, take him home," I exclaimed, facing them excitedly, "and put the key to the Far Eastern question into the hands of Her Majesty's ministers."

"Look here, Mr. Randolph," said the captain, "do you want to be sunk by these Russians?"

He must have been a good deal upset to adorn his remarks with adjectives; it was not at all his custom.

"I don't care," I answered, "we must chance it. We'll hope they won't risk making an international question over one rotten little yacht."

"There'd be no questions asked, bless you!" returned Pilkington.

"We must trust to luck," I repeated.

"I think you must be mad," said Samuel.

"Very likely," I said obstinately. I firmly determined to carry my point, and I never made up my mind yet without succeeding. If we came to grief, *tant pis!* But I never believed for a moment that we should; fortune favours the foolhardy.

"Of course you've got to give the orders, and I've got to obey them," said Farlane, "but there's Doctor Pilkington and Lord Tralee."

"I think you ought to be in Hanwell," observed Samuel genially to me, "though I'll stand in with you over this obviously losing game. But theré's Tralee."

But the Irishman rose mightily to the occasion.

"I think Randolph's quite right," he announced, "it would be devilish unsportsmanlike to chuck up the sponge now."

"Feel the air," suggested Farlane, lifting his cap; "ever

feel anything so close and muggy? Did you notice those flies which came aboard in the afternoon? miles out to sea, mind."

I thought he had suddenly gone off his head.

"Look at the glass," he proceeded, "pretty low, isn't it? Do you know what that means, in this latitude? We're in for a typhoon."

"Well?" I said.

"Now do you still think it worth it, sir?" he demanded.

"By all means," I returned with the cheerfulness of utter ignorance, "let there be a race between the torpedo-boat, the typhoon, and ourselves. If we can't escape the typhoon, all the more reason not to be captured by the torpedo-boat."

"Well, all I can say is," remarked the captain, "I don't think one blooming little yellow heathen worth it."

"As worth it as an unfeeling white Christian," I asseverated; "as long as I am alive, the Emperor of Cathay is as safe on this yacht as in his own palace—and a sight safer," I added, remembering recent occurrences. "When I'm dead, you can please yourselves; but you've got to wait till then."

Pilkington shook his head dubiously.

"You're quite right, old man," repeated Tralee; "we'll see you through it."

The Scotch captain was not a person to pour forth unnecessary lamentations; from that moment onwards, he never said another word against my decision. I had spoken. Pilkington, a man of cast-iron nerve, went to take a look at his patient, after which his expressed intention was to turn in. Tralee, after requesting in a sleepy voice to be waked when the Russians began firing, fell violently asleep with his head on the table in the deck saloon.

I went up on deck and took one look at the torpedo-boat

through my glass. I watched a little while, and suddenly and whimsically there darted into my head the line: "Crawling things with legs that walked upon the slimy sea." If I had watched any longer, I should have become the maniac Pilkington already thought me. I shut up my glass, and took to walking up and down the deck at a measured pace. One, two; one, two. Left . . . left . . . left. . . .

I abstracted myself entirely. Having eyes, I saw not, having ears, I heard not, neither did I allow my thoughts to wander to our situation, absorbing as the topic might be. "That way madness lies," I argued. "I am not mad. I never was mad. I don't want to be mad. Pilkington is a fool. One, two, three, four. What do four paces measure? I forget. Samuel's mad, if you like. He chucked away his career. Samuel is undoubtedly mad. I wonder how his last book sold." So my brain worked in short jerks, not thinking, only formulating thoughts with no back to them, so to speak.

I must have gone to sleep walking—a by no means impossible thing, especially with nerves like mine. I became oblivious of everything, except a certain rhythmical beat which seemed to knock through the dead blackness which fell on me. Perhaps, like the soul of Hans Andersen's night watchman when the Slippers of Fortune shod him, I went a-wandering among the stars, and could still hear throughout space my own footsteps on the deck of the *Flosshilde*. But if so, I went on a fool's errand, pursuing the proverbial wild goose, for I brought nothing away with me, no, not the faintest glimmer of worlds beyond space and a fairer sphere than ours. I came back out of the dark like the reincarnated soul, with eyes held and ears sealed and memory dumb. When consciousness returned, in ever broadening circles, the stars and crescent moon had paled

out against the brightening sky, and a creamy light brooded over the face of creation. Again a line of poetry started up in my memory, and I stared out to port as if I expected then and there to see "the dawn come up like thunder."

"I suppose it will be up in a moment," I remarked idiotically to Pilkington whom I suddenly found alongside me, staring at the dim line which marked off sea from sky.

"What, the sun?" he returned in a matter-of-fact voice.
"It's soon after five, so it won't rise just yet."

"I have been so well-regulated that I don't think I have seen day break for two years at least," I remarked conversationally.

"I'm going down to look at the run," was all Samuel's answer to my well meant efforts to make conversation.

"I suppose that the Thing is still crawling after us?" I said when he returned. He was busy writing figures on his shirt cuff and did not look up for a few moments.

"We've got about another half-hour," he exclaimed at last, and his voice rang out triumphantly. I am glad he was so much pleased.

I walked rapidly aft, focussing my glasses as I went; I was stopped by the stern-rail hitting me in the waistcoat. Somehow, as I stood there staring out to sea, with my elbows propped up, the others all seemed to rise up round me, without approaching corporeally. There was Samuel, pulling his short beard as he gazed at his shirt-cuff calculations; Tralee, with ruffled hair, and such a glare in his eyes as his red-haired ancestors may have stared the Saxon out of countenance with, when they followed Brian Boru on a foray; Farlane, as resigned as a Quaker at a prayer-meeting; and even Wu-Chow, his teeth rattling in his head as he tried to keep his hands warm within his sleeves. In the deceptive light and the uncertainty of distance over-

water, the torpedo-boat looked near enough to hit with a shied stone, and the whole of the expanse round us, above or below, showed besides no sign of life. There was not so much as a gull circling in the air, or a porpoise bounding out of a wave crest. The atmosphere hung dank and dead; I might have fancied, had I been superstitious, that the whole universe was waiting breathless to see the end. The swirl of our screws churned the Yellow Sea into an anguish froth, and our great heart of machinery beat like a hunted animal's at the end of a long run. The hornet buzzing through the waters on our track, seemed to gain on us span by span. I felt rather than saw Pilkington's hand go to his watch pocket.

"Devilish funny light," remarked Tralee.

A soughing wind came ripping over the waves to meet us and shivered in the rigging. Then I heard the case of Pilkington's watch click.

CHAPTER V

THE WHIRLWIND OF SALVATION

I HOLD that the man who is a good loser, has gone a long way towards solving the eternal riddle, the problem that was set our race when Eve took a bite from the apple she ought to have eaten whole. In the great unequal game we play with Fate, it must be a merit not to show peevish petulance when one has lost ; in a game in which one player holds all the stakes and the other is blindfolded, it stands to reason one cannot win more than one trick in a hundred. One goes on gambling because one must, so one may just as well grin over it as howl. If we do not care whether we win or lose, we end by taking an impersonal pleasure in the pure sport of it. Lots of good people howl a great deal ; moreover, they are shocked when you tell them the whole thing from start to finish is a big game, with an impartial Fate as a croupier. They like to think there is a special Providence sitting up aloft somewhere, keeping an eye on all their little concerns, and making a point of annoying them when it can. They therefore think it most impious to laugh when the game is going against you ; they are afraid of their spiteful and all-puissant Providence taking a nasty, ungentlemanly revenge. If I was troubled with their superstitions, I should prefer

to have dealings with Satan, who we are assured knows how to behave himself.

I had played my stake, and I had lost it. I knew Fate was raking it in when I heard Pilkington's watch click, and I felt more cheerful and contented than I had for hours past. It was a big stake, too. I did not think the Russians would have interfered with the others. . . . British subjects, and void of offence in the cardinal matter which constituted our bone of contention, . . . but I did not mean the enemy to deprive me of the Emperor while I was alive ; even if I had to settle things with the officer in command of the torpedo-boat in a vulgar manner by means of a revolver. Looking back, I can see that my method of arguing was not very logical ; for at the time, the Emperor's life hung on a thread, and it did not really seem worth while to take so much trouble. But I was a good bit above myself with excitement, and it never takes much opposition to make me almost idiotic in my determination not to give way a hand's breadth ; I get into a sort of Berserker fury, and it is all up with logic and everything else.

Sure that the game was lost, I put down my glasses and looked round with a cheery smile which was not reflected in the faces of my companions. On the contrary, they looked gloomier and gloomier, the lurid light of that ominous dawn seeming to have passed into their very personalities. My encouraging remarks died on my lips, and the shadow fell on me also ; we were waiting for the end, and sea and sky were waiting with us. Darker and darker grew the sky ; a veil, as of imperial purple, seemed to be drawing over our doomed heads ; more and more turgid grew the sea, showing angry white horses far out on every side ; thicker and thicker grew the air, weighted with a heat of accumulated tempest. Then a shrieking

wind flew by us, and the white horses reared higher and higher ; the whole surrounding universe seemed to wake with a start, and voices spoke in the air as the rigging cried aloud, and every timber in the *Flosshilde's* structure groaned, as a hare shrieks in her agony when the hounds are upon her.

"God help us!" ejaculated the doctor. "It's the typhoon."

"I see great waters," chimed in Wu-Chow, "even like the Sorrow of Han, when it is in flood."

"By the Lord, I believe they'll get the worst of it!" exclaimed the captain.

Pilkington began again with his eternal calculations as to how soon the storm would reach us at the probable pace it was travelling ; the words were snatched out of his mouth by a squall of wind, which at the same time tore the Homburg hat from the head of Wu-Chow, and tossed it into the sea. That mandarin fled into the deck saloon, where he was later found trying to improvise joss-sticks, by the burning of which to propitiate the demons of the storm. His preparations, which would certainly have resulted in setting the *Flosshilde* on fire, were gently but firmly taken away from him.

The gale took the waters up as one might in his hand, and raised it in great, foaming, crested banks, in the trough of which the *Flosshilde* danced like one bitten by the tarantula. Then there was a cessation, and Pilkington, Tralee, and I went below, feeling that the end of the game was not yet. Below, it was as dark as Egypt, and thick with an awful suffocating murkiness that was too solid to be a joke. We sat down in the deck saloon, and I got out my coffee-roasting apparatus ; I was just fixing the component parts thereof, when the *Flosshilde* rolled to a most alarming angle, and the brass lid flew out of

my hand, while my low chair tobogganed impetuously across the drugget floor. Tralee fell off his sofa, and Pilkington only saved himself with much agility from a downfall. Down the companion, a loud crash was heard.

Hour after hour this sort of thing went on. The *Flosshilde* rolled till I never thought she could right herself again, and everything movable flew all over the place. The atmosphere grew worse and worse, till one could "bite into it, and chew it like gum," as Mark Twain says; and we sat sweltering in the heat and darkness, feebly cursing the unpleasantness of our existence. Only Farlane's spirits rose, as hour after hour passed, bringing no news of the torpedo-boat.

"Oh, we're getting a mere trifle of it!" he assured us, every time he was seen.

So the Crawling Thing was, by the grace of God, getting lost. I could squeeze out no crocodile's tears.

Towards morning we slowed down, but the typhoon was still raging. Farlane assured me that we could expect no abatement of the tempest for many an hour to come, and on hearing this, it dawned upon me that I had practically been up all night.

I gave up the unequal contest and retired to my bunk; faith, I was sleepy! I verily believe half a dozen hours of blank oblivion were alone what saved my brain from giving way under the strain of late events. There had been a good deal too much of the "peril-on-the-deep" style about the business to entirely please me; I like a somewhat quieter form of existence, and am not fond of problems which require to be instantaneously dealt with; undoubtedly, I should never have made an ambassador.

I woke up again to find the typhoon still raging over the waters, as indeed it continued to do all that day and

far into the night, when it lulled down almost as suddenly as it arose. We quite missed it when it was gone, as it had become a sort of companion; moreover, it truly acted the part of a friend to us, for we could scan the whole waste of waters with all the strongest glasses on board without discovering the faintest sign of the Crawling Thing.

Three days more brought us into friendly waters in the shape of Hong Kong, and here I took pains to impress upon everybody that an absolute silence must be observed concerning our recent adventures. After my most eloquent exhortations to leave the mystery with the typhoon, I turned to old Wu-Chow.

"Here we are in an English port," I said; "so you see that all is well at last."

"Yes, great Excellency, but we have not made an end with the Empress yet," was his comforting answer; "we will see what she will say."

"At any rate, I should think we might disembark them here," I said to Pilkington.

"Disembark the old man by all means," returned the doctor, "but as to the other, you may as well take him on. You'll only kill him, poor little beast, if you move him now."

I must here state that the Emperor developed pneumonia the day after we picked him up.

"Honourable Wu-Chow," I said ingratiatingly, "it is doubtless not in your noble intentions to honour our degraded vessel any more with your august presence, but when we reach the city of Hong Kong, it will be your distinguished pleasure to leave our sordid company."

"No, great Excellency," glibly returned Wu-Chow, "it is a vast honour that my mean body should re-

pose in your magnificent ship, and one that I shall not forego."

"But my obnoxious vessel is going yet many miles by sea to England, and you cannot be intending to shower such favour upon it as to proceed so far in so debased a tub," I protested, reeling out the most flowery sentences in my need.

"Surely where the Son of Heaven goes, I will go too," returned the aged limpet; "there is now no place for the sole of Wu-Chow's foot in his own land, and the graves of his fathers have forgotten him. Rather shall he follow the Son of Heaven, yea, to the uttermost parts of the earth."

"I suppose the old sinner thinks his services will be forgotten if he ever lets himself out of sight," I said to Samuel.

"And men's memories being short," said the doctor, "he's probably right."

From whatever motive Wu-Chow was quite firm, and declined with consistency to be left behind at Hong Kong, so as there was no question of leaving the Emperor, we flew westward with our burden undiminished. Meanwhile Wu-Chow showed himself not by any means the "stupid old ass" Tralee irreverently called him.

"Certain notes have I in a bag," he remarked, approaching me as I was preparing to go ashore, "notes which the Prince Yih gave me for the use of the Son of Heaven in a far country. Were it not well to exchange them even here in Hong Kong, where the notes and *cash* of Cathay are also current?"

I was decidedly of this opinion.

"Then will I give them into your worshipful hands," said Wu-Chow, acting promptly on his own suggestion.

Opening the fat bag which he pressed on me, I was surprised at the amplitude of its contents ; Prince Yih did not intend his sovereign to go empty-handed. Or perhaps this was the accumulations of Wu-Chow's own devious practices. This, on the whole, appeared to me more probable, but I made no comment.

I went on shore almost entirely for the sake of sentiment ; I had little thought ever to see Hong Kong any more, a friendly city as it looked to me that September day. My mother tongue fell on my ears with a most grateful sound, after the nightmare visions of a lifelong Cathayan prison which had been rife about my pillow of late. To hear it in the mouth of the street was a guarantee of safety and homecoming, and all that was desirable, as typified in dear old England. Meanwhile we had scarcely landed, when Tralee burst into verbal indiscretions.

"I've been thinking over that story of Wu-Chow's," he seized an inopportune moment to exclaim, in a loud, cheerful voice, "and I must say it sounds to me unlikely ; why the dickens didn't the stupid old ass go by train ?"

"Because he would have been recognised, you blithering idiot," I returned in a rapid whisper, "and whatever you do, don't mention Wu-Chow, or any other Celestial here. Can't you get it into your thick head that we don't want any one in this place to know we've anything on board out of the common ?"

Tralee shut his mouth with a snap and said no more, but the subject was bound to crop up. At the landing-stage, we encountered a report that the Emperor of Cathay was dead ; going along the streets, this rumour gathered confirmation ; and on arriving at the British agency, we were assured by the most official authority that the yellow potentate was so dangerously ill that a foreign doctor had

been called in. Pilkington looked at me significantly, and said : "Curious!"

Tralee whistled.

"Truth is stranger than the inventions of newspaper reporters." was all I said.

CHAPTER VI

DECK-CHAIR DISCOURSIVENESS

AT Colombo, we all went ashore again greedy for news, but heard nothing further with regard to the Old Lady at Cambaluc and her nefarious actions, the only intelligence to hand being that the British, German, and Russian embassies had considered it advisable to ask for military protection. This did not enlighten us much, as it might mean anything or nothing, and at any rate the garrisoning of the city of Cambaluc by foreign troops would not affect us to any extent.

It was the evening of our arrival at Colombo that I again went to see the Emperor. Wu-Chow spent hours daily crawling on the floor of the state-room, according to the disgusted Pilkington, who had imbibed a bitter contempt for the old mandarin ; but I had been unwilling to obtrude myself while the Emperor was ill and delirious ; I could not do anything for him, and I preferred to stay away. It was Pilkington's firm determination not to allow the Emperor to slip through our fingers, after all the vicissitudes we had undergone to bring him away from his country ; so by the time we reached Colombo, the unhappy potentate was not only out of danger, but slowly recovering, and Samuel went about with an expression of absorbed self-conceit, while Wu-Chow brought me a daily bulletin of his sovereign's health, to which I listened as much, or as little, as I felt

inclined at the moment. On getting back to the yacht at Colombo I told Wu-Chow to ask if the Emperor would see me, and after a good deal of delay, the answer came that the Son of Heaven was graciously pleased to grant my request.

At the threshold of the state-room, my guide prostrated himself, but I, having no intention of emulating his antics, made a bow and said I hoped his Celestial Majesty was feeling better that evening . . . this being about all I was capable of saying in the Tartar tongue. The Emperor, at my entrance, had made a sort of movement of skrinking away into the shadow, and I could hardly see his face amongst his pillows. It was some minutes before he could make up his mind to answer me, and then he stammered a few words I did not understand. I asked Wu-Chow to interpret for me, and that conversational old mandarin poured forth a flood of rhetoric, afterwards explaining that he had told the Emperor all about me, which was undoubtedly clever, considering that he was not in possession of the information he professed to furnish. During Wu-Chow's rendering of my hope that all was as the Emperor wished and that he found Samuel useful, I saw his Majesty looking at me, but on meeting my eyes, he quickly averted his and almost hid his face, like a shy child. My first interview with the Son of Heaven was not quite a success.

After that, I went to see him every day. The second time he saw me, he greeted me with a half-frightened, half-friendly smile, and asked my honourable age ; but that effort seemed to exhaust his stock of courage, and he instantly turned his face to the partition as if the answer had overwhelmed him. But when I came oftener and stayed longer, talking generally to Wu-Chow in Cathayan and to Pilkington in English, the Emperor soon

became less nervous and more inquisitive. Very early in our acquaintance, he wanted to know if I was the son of a king, and on his hearing that I had no connection with royalty, I understood him to tell Wu-Chow that I must be *Tsung-Tu* (a viceroy) at least, and that the band on my yachting cap was probably the badge of my dignity. He made very slow progress towards complete recovery, and most days he seemed too weak and listless to speak at all, but soon after we left Aden, Wu-Chow confided to me with great pomp and majesty that my diurnal visit gave pleasure to his sovereign liege.

"The Son of Heaven has cast the eyes of his favour on you, great Excellency," he remarked, "you seem goodly in his sight, and he is pleased with you."

"Very kind of the Son of Heaven, I am sure," I returned.

"Doubtless," proceeded Wu-Chow, blandly unaware of my inclination to laugh, "you will now fill the place of Sung-Taou, and stand very high before the Son of Heaven."

"In that case, I shall take care nobody makes away with me as they did with Sung-Taou," I replied lightly.

"It is in many ways a pity," observed Wu-Chow, "because you are a foreigner and will lead the Son of Heaven yet farther in the evil paths to which he has turned his footsteps. You are a very good foreigner, and in some respects I think you worthy to be of my own race, but it is natural you should think your own barbarous customs the best, and teach the Great Pure One to forget the superiority of Cathay. I do not blame you," he added hastily, "but perhaps after all it will be best if the Great Pure One became a guest in heaven. None can say it is my fault, no, not in Cambaluc, for I have done very well."

"Don't you be afraid," I said; "the Great Pure One isn't going to trouble heaven in a visiting capacity just yet. He's going to get well, and he's going to England with

me, and then he'll go back to Cathay again and teach you all how to manage things in the English fashion."

"He will never go back while the Empress Ah-Seu is alive," returned Wu-Chow, shaking his head, "neither will the mandarins permit it. There is danger to them in the evil decrees which the Son of Heaven wished to force on the people. For me, I am old ; I shall never see Cambalu again. I did very well, and I suffer."

"You poor old martyr!" I said in English, adding for his benefit, "never mind, the English people will take back the Son of Heaven in their ships of war, and will place him on the throne with a great army, and then you will all see the greatness of the West."

Wu-Chow looked dismal.

"That will be a very terrible day, and Cathay will fall in the dust," he prophesied.

"Not at all, Cathay will become even greater than before," I said comfortingly ; "we, who are the greatest nation in the world, and the Russians, who are the next greatest, will teach her to march with the times. Such a fine thing to know, Wu-Chow, you can't think."

"The wisdom of the foreigner is doubtless very wise," replied Wu-Chow diplomatically, "but the wisdom of K'ung-fu-tze was good enough for our ancestors, and it is good enough for us."

And he waddled off, entirely satisfied that he had got the best of the argument.

"Funny old Johnny!" ejaculated Tralee, "I should like to get to the bottom of why he saved his Son of Heaven after all."

"So should I," I answered, "and we never shall, or at least it is very improbable. I suspect the old gentleman of having got into a mess of some sort in Cathay, but that wouldn't explain his kidnapping the Emperor, and getting

into a still worse mess. I suspect there's somebody at the back of the whole concern who's playing a very big game with the Dowager Empress. I don't know who it is, and I don't much care, for I'm going to take a hand in the game myself now."

"You'll be playing in the dark, old man," remarked Tralee; "you don't know who the other people are, nor what cards they hold. I shan't put my little pennies on you."

"I can play by as much light as they give me, and I hold the King—or the Emperor—at any rate."

"But he isn't guarded," interpolated Pilkington.

"And if ever I find out who the third player is, I'm game to make a combination in order to diddle that ungodly old female at Cambaluc," I added; "meanwhile we're all pawns, and it's Fate that's moving the pieces."

"I wish you wouldn't try to talk like that," said Pilkington crushingly; "you always mix your metaphors so confoundedly."

"Well, I can't play chess a bit," I remarked irrelevantly. Pilkington looked at me pityingly, so of course I threw my cushion at him. We were sitting on deck-chairs after breakfast and missiles were handy. The weather was splendid, and it dawned upon Samuel to announce that the stuffiness of the state-room was making his patient languid and that he would be better in the air; so we had him carried up on deck, while the illogical Wu-Chow nearly danced at the idea of barbarians daring to touch his sacred Emperor.

We had some difficulty in rigging out that Celestial personage in the limited capacity of our wardrobes, as far as his national costume was concerned. He could have swum about in Tralee's clothes, and Pilkington's sleeves and trousers were too short; my garments came nearest

to suitability, and the badness of their fit was not very apparent among the rugs and wraps in which Pilkington tucked up his patient in his deck-chair. I held off till Pilkington had done fussing about, and then I came up, cap in hand, to the sheltered corner where he had bestowed the Emperor; Tralee followed me, and I presented him, grinning all over his face, and looking at the Emperor as if he were some odd sort of doll.

The Emperor took the presentation of Tralee better than I expected, being, I think, a good deal dazzled by the light, and bewildered by the novelty of his surroundings. He bent his head gravely, and asked if Tralee was my brother. I explained that Tralee was a king in his own land (he says he ought to be, but so do all Irishmen—if everybody had their rights in Ireland there would be a surprising paucity of subjects); but owing, I suppose, to my ~~in~~fect knowledge of Tartar, this information did not seem to have much effect on the Emperor.

Seeing him as I now did, out in the sunlight, clothed and in his right mind, I had no further difficulty in making up my mind whether he was the true Chin-Wang or not. I had only seen him once at Cambaluc, true, but voice and gesture all came back to me as I spoke to him on the deck of the *Flosshilde*; he was quite enough unlike other people to be easily recognised. He had a very indifferent physique, with the narrowest chest and most sloping shoulders I ever saw, so that he gave the impression of being small, though on his feet he measured nearly six foot, having the thigh-bones of a much bigger man. His skin was clear and soft, the colour of old ivory, his head small but well-shaped and well put on his shoulders, and his face, for a Mongolian, was handsome. His subjects must have admired him very much, as he possessed their chief criterion of beauty, a large nose, with rather wide

nostrils ; his ears were also rather large, set high and flat to the head, and his jaw and chin were of the nutcracker pattern. But he had fine eyes, not slanting perceptibly, but long and narrow, with inch-long eyelashes like a woman's, and regularly curving eyebrows, and his mouth was like a statue's.

I have remarked that people with these particularly beautiful mouths have often lovable, but rarely strongly marked characters ; they can feel and they can act, but they cannot judge, neither can they endure. They could snap like a shark, but never hold on like a bulldog. When I looked at the little Emperor's mouth, I understood why the Dowager Empress got the best of it. His whole look was that of one foredoomed to trouble ; for the cast of his face was deeply sad and weary, with the melancholy eyes and the shy, childish smile that flickered on his lips. He looked as if he were tired of a world that he did not understand, and that had not treated him well. I remembered the look when I saw him in his own capital, but I thought it was intensified.

Tralee's behaviour was disgustingly uncivilised. He looked the Emperor all over, as he might a horse he was going to buy (only not so seriously), and seemed to fancy that it was an occasion to make foolish and ribald remarks, and that the situation generally was comic. Tralee's humour is almost invariably unseasonable.

"Fancy meetin' *him*!" he observed coarsely. " You were always fond of pets, old man, but an Emperor's a new sort to have running about the house, ain't it? How soon will he eat out of your hand? Can't you put him through some of his tricks?"

"Shut up!" I exclaimed hastily, concocting a remark to make in Tartar (I had not progressed beyond the stage of translating my thoughts before I uttered them),

while I kept a look out for some one I could send for Wu-Chow.

"We shall have to set to and teach him to talk," pursued Tralee, "he'll soon pick it up; especially cuss-words. Parrots do."

. "You'd make a good professor of English!" I remarked witheringly.

Then the Emperor astonished us both.

"I have studied the English much," he said; "I understand it very well spoken."

He spoke with quite a decent accent, but very slow, as if feeling for his words as they slid away from him. Tralee exclaiming, "Oh Lord!" plunged into his proper place in the background, and I felt like a fool. I had not expected for a moment that he would be able to speak any language but his own, having forgotten all about Sung-Taou and his abnormal linguistic abilities.

"I am very glad, sire," I said hastily, then slowing down, as I remembered that he probably could not understand the alien tongue spoken rapidly; "I speak the Tartar very little, but Cathayan I have been trying to learn for years. Your Majesty understands me when I speak?"

"Yes, yes, I understand," said the Emperor, and he spoke nervously, stammering and repeating himself, "tongues are good to speak, very good, you think so too?"

"Oh, certainly, sire," I returned glibly, "in fact, I have heard that somebody or other, whose name I have forgotten, wrote or remarked that the man who knew two languages was as good as two men."

The Emperor nodded slowly, as he took in this profound axiom, and I was preparing even higher flights of fancy, when he asked quite suddenly:

"How many men are you, Excellency?"

"I am six men, sire," I said, falling in with the idea. He did not echo my laugh.

"I am three men only," he said gravely, "three men and a little man beside, for Sung-Taou told me words of other tongues also, and I remember well."

"Sung-Taou was the poor devil of a revolutionary Johnny they chopped the head off of, wasn't he?" whispered Tralee, expressing himself wondrously, as usual.

At this point the conversation seemed to have become altogether too much for the feeble enduring powers of the Emperor, and he turned his head away from us on the pillow and closed his eyes. We took this as a dismissal, and pulled our deck-chairs back a little to a position in which, presumably out of earshot, we resumed whatever fragmentary conversation we had been holding when the Emperor was carried up. He did not volunteer any further remarks and seemed to doze in his chair; we lounged and smoked, and talked spasmodically, while the day wore on. It was the sort of temperature and outlook which made one feel competent to write a sequel to "*The Ancient Mariner*," the only piece of maritime literature, by the way, with the exception of "*The Seven Seas*" of Rudyard Kipling, of which I can boast a knowledge.

When the sun began to hang low in the burning sky, and little breezes came ripping over the waves to kiss the reeking sides of the *Flosshilde*, the Emperor stirred in his chair and began to cough. Pilkington started up from nowhere, and asserted his intention of removing his patient, whereon Tralee called up the only yachtsman in sight, and offered his own services as a bearer.

"I should strongly advise your Celestial Majesty," he said in a very loud voice, "not to be any more ill than you can help, or *he*," pointing to Pilkington, "will put you into a book."

"What a fool you are, Tralee!" remarked the doctor, totally ungrateful for this spontaneous advertisement. The Emperor only smiled, his timid tired smile, and said nothing.

After this, Samuel had his patient carried up on deck every day, and growing more assured of himself with use, his Celestial Majesty soon ceased to blink like an owl suddenly brought out of darkness. As he gradually sorted his confused sensations, he talked more, though he was never voluble at any time, and showed that during the hours when he sat silent, watching us and listening to our talk, he observed many things, laying them to heart backed with strange crooked reasoning of his own. He got over difficulties very rapidly by supposing that everything which seemed to him outlandish was an English custom, but at first a great many things stuck in his throat. To our manners, he took no exception, but he wanted to know why the yachtsmen did not prostrate themselves. Of course, as a Celestial, he was beautifully bred, and never directly stated that all things appertaining to us were not perfect of their kind, but all the same, it was often obvious what he thought of them. He took kindly enough to our clothes, but our food he plainly thought abominable.

"I do not think, if you will excuse, that I drink your honourable tea," he remarked after the first trial.

He grew very fond of me. He respected Pilkington, more because of his healing powers than of his book-learning, and he liked Tralee, though he thought him undignified; but he palpably considered me a remarkably superior person, not to say supernatural, and took every word of mine as if I had received private information from the Deity.

. "The Son of Heaven believed no man, but Sung-Taou only."

This phrase of Wu-Chow's I remembered, and I could see Wu-Chow remembered it too, when he watched me holding the Emperor up, as he tottered uncertainly across the deck. I had no desire to fill Sung-Taou's evacuated place, but I could not very well resent the fact that the Emperor preferred me to Tralee, and regarded me as more veracious than the much better informed Pilkington. Samuel's tact is not as highly developed as his enthusiasm, and he did not take the best way of ingratiating himself with the Emperor, by announcing to us that he intended to learn all about Confucianism. The Emperor bore this thirst for knowledge very well for a day or so ; then he seemed to have taken Samuel's measure, and for every question he put about Tao and such mysteries, Chin-Wang asked him two about Christianity. Whereupon Pilkington was obliged to desist from cross-examination, Christianity not being his strong point, and we listened with carefully hidden smiles. It certainly seemed comic that the frightened little Emperor, who looked so soft and childish, should be able to grapple with the indomitable doctor.

But his Celestial Majesty Chin-Wang of Cathay was by no means lacking in shrewdness of a sort. Also, as I very soon discovered, he had a sort of timid hankering after the new and unknown ; he liked to hear about things never dreamt of in his philosophy, to turn them over in his mind, and taste them as it were, and it was an interesting experiment to hold up new points of view to him and see how he would take them. Evidently Sung-Taou had talked to him a great deal, and made Herculean efforts to rouse him out of his constitutional and educational lethargy ; and in the paths which Sung-Taou had pointed out to him, he was eager enough to walk. If he recognised any of the flowers of progress, as mentioned and belauded by Sung-Taou, he was always ready to add the weight of

his own imperial approval ; thus he was never tired of watching the engines, because Sung-Taou had told him how the foreign devils drove their ships. He never got excited or enthusiastic, but he liked to look on quietly.

For the rest, the chief topic which interested him deeply was the doings of other emperors, and to draw on my imagination for information on this abstruse subject was a continual temptation, my connection with royalty having been cursory and superficial in the extreme. It was by no means easy to find anecdotes he would understand, nor always certain that he had ever heard of the personages to which they referred. But when I told him he was taller than the Emperor of Russia, he was very much pleased.

"And your Queen also is an Emperor," he remarked in the tone of one who has made a discovery, "so women rule in the West as well as in the East."

"Yes, but they do it a deal better in the West," I replied, my loyalty outraged at the mere thought of a comparison between her most gracious Majesty and the iniquitous Celestial Empress. He looked at me with his shrewd, narrow eyes, as if he understood. Then he sighed and looked away.

"It is no use to fight Fate," he remarked.

"Not to fight Fate, perhaps, your Majesty," I said in the explanatory tone one might use to a child, "but individuals, and even Governments, are not Fate, and can be fought with great advantage. Personally, I have not even a momentary objection to take up arms against circumstances, as I think I have already proved."

"But that's you all over," observed Pilkington scornfully ; "you always attempt the impossible."

"I am glad to find myself possessing the greatest

British attribute," I returned, "of not knowing when I am beaten."

"That may be philosophy of a sort, but I don't see the good of doing things only to have them undone again."

On touching at Malta, we received the news that all the edicts prompted by Sung-Taou had been withdrawn, and reactionary decrees published by the Dowager Empress instead. Hence this remark of Pilkington's.

"At that rate, nobody would ever get up and do anything," I said, "and I don't see much use in that, anyhow. Abuses won't reform themselves."

"Not before the time comes, and the man with it certainly," said Pilkington.

"And even then they won't go quietly; you must admit there's always a bust-up of some sort."

"A revolutionary theory!"

"Revolutions, good Samuel, are like our friend the typhoon. They clear the air."

"They are the rottenness of nations," retorted Pilkington, "and continual revolutions show that there are no honest men in the country. If the State is healthy, why should it need reform? if the body is healthy, it doesn't need drugs."

"But in the meanwhile, you don't instantly knock your patient on the head, when a little doctoring would set him straight again," I appended; "you up and apply the doctoring, and thank your stars you're in time. You can't help it if the patient isn't pleased and won't use your remedies. In that case no doubt he's a wrong-headed scoundrel, and had better die and give you no more trouble. But it seems rough not to give him a chance, if he's willing to take it."

"You talk like Sung-Taou," put in the Emperor. God

knows how much he understood of our remarks! "They said I should not have listened to Sung-Taou," he added reflectively, "but I don't know. Sung-Taou told me things I never heard before, and what he said seemed very wise, and good for the people."

Successor to Sung-Taou! Well, it wasn't a post I coveted, but obviously both Wu-Chow and the Emperor were determined to thrust this greatness on me.

CHAPTER VII

A QUESTION OF ELIGIBILITY

WE arrived in the Thames late one evening during the second week of November, landing at Tilbury, where I had a special to meet us. There is something in the remark of the man who said that the chief joy of travelling lay in the return to England. We left on a sunny day of June and returned on a raw evening of November : yet I do not mind betting we were all a great deal more pleased with things in general on the second occasion than on the first. This sounds a little as if we had disagreed considerably in the interim, which was not at all the case ; Tralee, the doctor, and I knew each other very well and there was small chance of discovering disagreeable and hitherto unrevealed peculiarities, even by the crucial test of a long voyage. I am (I put myself first on purpose that ill-natured people may not say I observe my friend's motes and ignore my private beam)—I am desperately nervous and irritable ; impulsive, also, and pig-headed ; Tralee is idle and objectless, but his chief failings do not appear among his own sex ; and Pilkington is dry and pedantic, conceited about his attainments, . and much too well-informed ; but that is the worst that can be said against any of us, and we knew it all before. We shook hands at the terminus without the faintest idea of disillusion.

Pilkington usually stays with me in London ; but my

little box in Bryanston Square has only one spare bedroom, so I sent him off to take care of Wu-chow at Witt's Hotel in Piccadilly. Tralee went to his mother, who has a house in Chesham Place ; and I took the Emperor, who was very plaintive from extreme weariness, to my own hovel. The door was opened to us by my trusty butler, Williams, the best-bred servant in the world, who on my informing him that I had brought the Emperor of Cathay with me, merely replied, in a tone of polite interest : "Really, sir ? "

Of course, I found sacks of letters waiting for me, but as they were nearly all bills and circulars, there was no cause for excitement in them. Only on the top there was a recent one bearing the postmark of that same morning. I had telegraphed to my favourite niece, Violet, to say I was coming back, and this letter was from her mother, losing no time to accost me. I should have preferred to see Violet's own handwriting, as my sister-in-law does not interest me to any great extent ; moreover, it might mean that Violet was out of town, which would make a distinct difference to me : Violet and I are great friends. Her mother's communication ran as follows :—

"DEAREST LOUIS,—I do not know at what hour you arrive," (how like her to put it in that pedantic way !), "but I trust you will come and see me at the earliest opportunity" (this was heavily underlined) ; "I am in great trouble, and must have your advice and assistance. I suppose you did not get my letter, posted last week, and that Violet has told you nothing of this dreadful affair ? "

I am inclined to get nervous when people write in this oracular way, even though I know of old that my sister-in-law, for one, is apt to make mysteries unnecessarily

and to indulge in tragic declamation over very commonplace misadventures. In this case, I had no clue whatever to the disaster. I reflected about it half the night, which, by the way, was not intelligent—for, when I opened the letter, it was too late to rush round at once with my advice and assistance. I knew the former would be useless in any case ; it always is. Assistance generally means money ; yet I knew my family could not be in a pecuniary scrape of any magnitude. My sister-in-law administered her revenues in a manner beyond reproach, and she could not touch her capital, as I knew, being one of her trustees ; Violet certainly exceeded her allowance with a regularity which might be praiseworthy in another cause, but she would confide in me sooner than in her mother, and anyhow she could not very well have brought about a financial crisis in so short a time. Giles was my idea of a born fool, but he had shown no signs at present of desiring to scatter cash unnecessarily. If anybody was ill, neither my advice nor my assistance would be of the slightest use ; I woke in the morning with the conclusion that something dire must have happened to a servant or a dog.

I had a cab called as soon as I was up, for I knew that my sister-in-law's household was early afoot ; it was located in West Halkin Street, and though for a wonder I was not blocked opposite the Bachelors' Club, it took me at least twenty minutes to get there. I suggested to the cabman that it was not kind of him to keep so ancient and infirm a quadruped from a well-earned rest in the grave ; but he differed from me with considerable fluency, and accused me and my entire class of desiring to impart instruction to better-informed persons. I do not think he would have advanced this impeachment if he had not considered himself entitled to a larger sum than I thought proper to give him, and if I had not desired him to reflect on his

probable latter end, when he said: "Make it two bob, guvnor."

My sister-in-law comes of rather a stiff and ceremonious family; she was one of the late Duke of Alderney's daughters, who all married men in the same county (not their own), and they were all very old-world in style, entertaining obsolete views, and given to out-of-date practices. Her husband was only my half-brother, and was old enough to have been my father; he died half-a-dozen years ago, the only relation, except some cousins, that I possessed in the world. I never saw much of him, or entertained any sentiment about him; I do not believe anybody ever did, for though a sensible, practical man enough, he had no attractive qualities. He laboured all his life against the disadvantages of having succeeded to a heavily encumbered property and of having married into a family which considered him a poor match for one of its scions. That noble connection always treats me with patronising condescension, for I am an even less distinguished personage than poor Evelyn. My sister-in-law thinks me eccentric, and it is an awful thing to be peculiar in her eyes; but she does not disdain to make use of me. I put up with it, because I am fond of her daughters.

On this particular occasion, I was shown up with a good deal of state to the drawing-room, where her ladyship and Violet were evidently awaiting me. They advanced to meet me in a most ceremonial way, till I felt I was at the court of Louis XIV., or some such *etiquette-beridden milieu*. My sister-in-law is a tall woman, with a stoutness which adds to the imposing nature of her appearance; she was wearing mourning for her son-in-law, my Eton friend, poor George Clifford, who died earlier in the year, and her skirts rustled aggressively as she crossed

the room. Violet is like her mother at the same age, I believe ; she is fairly tall, too, and what books call willowy, with a graceful walk, and a fine turn of head and shoulders. She is the prettiest girl, except one, that I ever saw. Outwardly she and her mother are the best of friends ; they are never seen apart, but I always wonder whether they hold each other in such high esteem as they profess, not only to the world, but even to me. Their loyalty is very admirable.

It was quite evident that Violet had received her instructions, for after returning my avuncular embrace, she lost no time in leaving the room. Then my sister-in-law sat down grandly in an armchair, bolt upright, with both hands folded in her lap ; I put my hat on the floor, and feverishly took off my gloves, before I found a resting-place on a sofa.

"Well, what's the trouble ?" I exclaimed hastily, taking pot shots at my hat with my gloves rolled into a ball.
"Nobody ill, I hope?"

"Oh no ! something much more shocking and dreadful. I am so surprised at Giles ! But you know what young men are, and I am sure you will be able to talk to him, and show him how impossible it is."

"Oh, it's Giles, is it ? What has he done ?" I inquired, regaining my calm. My chief intercourse with Giles consisted in periodically telling him he was an ass, and I was not distressed to learn that my opinion of him in that character had always been correct.

"Oh, my dear Louis, he wants to marry such a very dreadful and impossible person !"

"But I can't talk him out of that," I remarked ; "most likely he wouldn't listen to me."

"You are his guardian," said she, stating a fact which I already knew. My brother, knowing probably that his

son, for one, lay under the curse of Reuben, left it in his will that his children should come of age at five-and-twenty. "I should think you ought to be able to exert an influence over him, being a man and not really so much older."

"My dear Frances, I entertain no illusions about my sphere of influence. It is quite surprisingly limited, considering my high claims to attention. If I told Giles his matrimonial schemes were shocking, and the performance of them out of the question, he probably wouldn't care a——anything, in short. I do not believe Giles recognises the value and weight of my opinion. Meanwhile, who is the young woman, lady, or person, as the case might be?"

"She's an actress," replied my sister-in-law, in tones of tragic depth. "I must say—such temptations as poor Giles has been exposed to, with no father and no anything" (she spoke as if this was a sort of particularly protective relation)—"I always expected it."

"Then you can't have been so much surprised," I remarked.

"There seems to be some dreadful curse on my family," she went on, beginning to cry, "my poor sister, Ulrica Norwich, her girl eloped with a horrible opera-singer, and now this has come on me. I don't know what I have done, to have such trouble."

The dear lady is one of those who think there is a malevolent omnipotence sitting up aloft, and spying on their least peccadilloes, with the object of paying them back fourfold in afflictions and calamities. Still I hate to see any one cry, even if I know of old that their tears are near the surface, so I said soothingly:

"Well, well, my dear Frances, we'll hope it will not turn out so badly, after all. Lots of ladies go on the stage

nowadays, you know, and she may be quite a good sort of girl."

She shook her head vehemently.

"My dear Louis, how can she be nice, or a lady? Just think what a life theatrical people lead! How can anybody keep nice feelings and manners under such circumstances? Acting in improper plays too, and doing all sorts of things no girl can do. Oh, I know it's the fashion nowadays to fancy that girls may go anywhere and do anything, but it wasn't so in my time, and I think the old ways were the best. Look at Violet! I'm sure you'll be the last to deny that she's a very charming girl, and she's very popular wherever she goes. Think how carefully I brought her up, and dear Theodora too; how very particular I was about the books they read and the plays they saw and the friends they made. I always impressed upon them how I dislike fast, slangy, noisy girls. And everybody always said my two were so nice!"

Of poor little Theodora, *de mortuis*; as to Violet, she and I are great friends, and I ain loyal by nature.

"My dear," I said, "your girls are perfection. But because a young woman has transgressed the letter of your doubtless very estimable standard, it doesn't follow that she may not also be meritorious. What is her name, by the way?"

"She calls herself Sidney. It is sure not to be her name, though."

"That's as may be, and not very important. Do you know where she acts?"

"She was acting at the —— Theatre, I know, for I purposely avoided going to see the play."

"It's a good company," I remarked, "I know ——," naming the acting manager, "he's a very good sort, and an incontestable gentleman. Your young lady can't be a

very third-rate member of her profession. I thought you were going to say she danced at a music-hall."

"Oh well, I daresay she would do that, if nothing better came in her way," said my sister-in-law, with fine scorn. She has no eye for distinctions, and takes a view of all humanity as from a balloon in mid air. "Could you go and see her, Louis, and represent to her that she will ruin Giles's life, unless she releases him from this entanglement?"

"Go and see her!" I exclaimed. "But I don't know her."

"Surely that doesn't matter with that sort of person!" she answered, in a tone of wonder.

"I don't know. But I should think she would look upon it as an unwarrantable impertinence. After all, Frances, I'm not a newspaper interviewer and can't assume the character at a moment's notice."

"But I'm sure she could be made to see reason," urged my sister-in-law. "If it was a question of money, I would be only too glad to defraud myself to save Giles." This sounded like a broad hint, which affronted me. "That sort of person can always be bought off."

"Perhaps," I said coldly; "but I should prefer not to be the go-between." I reached for my hat. "I am sorry I cannot be of use to you."

"Oh, but, dear Louis!" she cried, clasping her hands, "at least, speak to Giles! You know that you can do that, perfectly well—being his guardian and all. I know he thinks so highly of you" (this was news to me), "and you're a man of the world, he'll believe what you say."

"I don't see what I am to say that is to receive this implicit credence," I returned. "I never heard of Miss Sidney before; therefore I assert, offhand, that she is respectable. My expenses at present are heavy, and I do not want to defray the costs of a libel action. I can

point out to Giles that his allowance will hardly be sufficient to marry on, and that he is expecting a great deal if he thinks the girl will wait for him four years. But I must say that, if my uncle, who is, fortunately, dead and beyond the reach of harm, had begun meddling in my private affairs, I should have requested him to take a single ticket to the infernal regions. I haven't much opinion of your son Giles's sense, but I don't think he is such a sheep as to put up with interference."

It is not a bit of good trying to show my sister-in-law that one is annoyed with anything she has said ; she does not think she can be offensive, and she cannot bring herself to believe that you are not yearning to be of assistance to her. What are one's relations for, except to help one out of one's difficulties? If, when they are in a quagmire themselves, they cannot flounder out alone, they are a great nuisance. Better so. I would sooner go under for good and all, than owe salvation to anybody with kindred blood in their veins. The taste of the pills one has to swallow when one is poor and dependent, clings to one's palate all one's life.

I was just leaving the house, when Violet came running down the stairs calling me. I turned back and pulled the front door to again, my irritation departing much quicker than snow in summer.

"Well!" exclaimed Violet breathlessly, catching hold of my sleeve, as if she thought I was going to vanish in a blue flame before her eyes, "and has mamma been talking to you about Giles? She has been in such a state of mind, you can't think, and the house has been *so* damp. Do tell me what you think."

"My dear," I answered, "I never think. It's a mistake."

"Oh, don't be stupid! You have some ideas about it all; do tell me, there's a dear!"

"Dear Violet," I returned, "how can I have ideas about it? I know nothing about the whole subject, and care less. If your brother marries on five hundred a year, which I believe is his present allowance, I shall consider him a fool. If the young woman does not know how to take care of herself, she is a fool also. And I do not suffer fools gladly, being myself far from wise."

"I call that having a great number of ideas and very concise ones, too," remarked Violet. "But are you going to do anything?"

"No. If I see your brother before it is too late, I shall ask him if he knows the price of bread and butter. I promised your mother I would do so, knowing it would cause him to love me all his life. But I have no intention of seeking him out to make this inquiry."

"I wish you would take me to see her act," said Violet.

"I will go and get tickets this very morning," I returned obligingly.

"I have been longing for you to come back," began she.

"Thank you," I interpolated hastily. "Same here, Mum, and many of 'em."

"Because I wanted to see her," proceeded Violet serenely. "You know mamma won't let me go to the theatre with any one but you, and I need hardly tell you she wouldn't go near 'The Woman' as she calls her. She looks such a dear—I mean the Woman—I cut a picture out of a paper, and I'll show it you."

"Can she act?" I asked; "for I think it would be a pity to import an inferior artist into the family."

Violet laughed.

"Oh, I suppose she can act," she said. "You know I don't read the papers."

"Of course I am aware of that fiction," I replied.

"You are very rude," said Violet, "I don't think I shall let you go yachting again; you seem to drop all your manners into the sea."

"Let us talk about something else," I suggested.

"By all means," returned the unruffled Violet. "How is Lord Tralee?"

"Flourishing," I replied; "and, by the way, I hope the children are still alive, robust and naughty. I forgot to ask after them, but you might breathe a word to their nurse to the effect that a loving great-uncle would welcome them to Bryanston Square at tea-time."

"They're out just now, or you might have seen them," said Violet; "it is such a pity, but Cuckoo is growing up and getting uninteresting. He has learnt to pronounce since you went away and now he no longer tells people that his 'name is Tuttoo Twifford; ' he'll want to be called Francis soon."

"Certainly he will, when he finds out the dire significance attached at school to the word 'Cuckoo.'"

We were standing in the hall, talking rather loudly as the family custom is. I say that if there is anything in heredity the Randolph family was descended from a fog-horn. It was perhaps not discreet to shout our remarks for the benefit of all who might choose to listen, but another thing the Randolphs are blessed with is a masterly indiscretion. I do not know, neither do I care, how much or how little my sister-in-law caught as she came downstairs, dressed to go out. At any rate her remark on reaching our level, was ambiguous.

"I thought you were gone, Louis."

"I shall be in a moment," I precipitately replied; but a thought arrested me half-way to the door.

"Violet," I said, "your taste in clothes is well known."

"I certainly have taught you a great deal," she calmly asserted.

"Well, you might come and assist me to select the wardrobe of a distressed sovereign, if your mother will allow you. It will be eminently proper, as it is only patterns of stuffs and such-like that you will be called upon to inspect. I advise you not to miss a historical opportunity."

"Will you please mention what you are talking about?" Violet and I always run verbal tilts of this nature.

"In plain language, suited to your comprehension," I returned, "I am buying an outfit for the Emperor of Cathay, and want your advice."

"Does the Emperor want the outfit? That's more to the purpose," said Violet.

"He does, indeed, having worn my clothes, which do not fit him, half the way home. He early expressed his imperial desire to wear European clothes henceforward, and really he doesn't look so very bad in them—or won't, when they are made for him."

"My dear Louis, how very extraordinary you are!" remarked my sister-in-law. "To hear you talk, one would think you had brought the Emperor of Cathay home with you in your yacht."

"But that's just what I did," I said.

"My dear Louis!" exclaimed both of them at once, "how in the world——"

"Oh, I just picked him up in a boat," I answered.

"He's making fun of us, mamma," said Violet.

"Don't cast such aspersions on my well-known wit," I said. "If you come up to my house to luncheon as requested, Violet, I will present you to his Majesty, and your mother whenever she likes."

"Funny man," said Violet, in a voice of mock melancholy, "you will make me die of laughing."

"Die away—only don't forget to come to luncheon," I answered, as I finally disappeared on to the doorstep.

I walked as far as Hyde Park Corner, and then took a hansom to the Foreign Office; there being nothing like getting things over, as many people, including Shakspeare, have discovered before me. My little Euperor, when very low in his spirits at the fatigue and strangeness of landing, told me that nothing should induce him to leave me, even if the English Government thought it etiquette. I did not think it very likely the English Government would make this pronouncement; I was not aware that the said Government was in the habit of dictating to foreign potentates on the subject of their temporary place of residence. At any rate, I insured off-hand and on my own authority that it would be all right.

Arrived at the Foreign Office, I asked to see the Foreign Secretary, who fortunately happened to be also Prime Minister. I was told that I might see his private secretary instead, and as I have known the gentleman in question since I was a boy, I accepted the alternative without arguing about it. The secretary was a man of urbane and pleasant manners, who prided himself on never being uncivil or peremptory to anybody; he greeted me with positive warmth.

"Look here, my dear —," I said without further hesitation, "I want to see Lord —. I shan't keep him long, only I have an announcement I must make to him."

"Can't you make it to me, to save trouble?" suggested — suavely, "Lord — is very busy just now."

"Certainly I can make it to you," I returned promptly; "it is with regard to Cathay. Of course, all you fellows

over here know about the *coup d'état* there. But there's one thing about the affair which you don't know, and which I am here to tell you. The Emperor of Cathay is in England."

"What makes you think so?" he asked, raising his eyebrows; "do you know this is a very remarkable statement?"

"I have got him in my house," I replied; "if you will listen a minute without interrupting, I will tell you how I picked him up."

I told my story, and waited for it to have its effect. The secretary listened politely, but with an expression of the blankest incredulity.

"But, my dear fellow," he remarked at the end, "up to the very latest telegrams received, the Emperor has been at Cambaluc."

"Not he," I replied; "they say so at Cambaluc very likely; but have you anything but the bare word of the Empress and her ministers that it is true?"

"Yes," was his unexpected reply, "the doctor of the German Legation was called in to make an examination of the Emperor, on account of reports circulated that he was dead or dying, and pronounced him delicate, but in no immediate danger. I will send for an old *Times* to show you the Reuter's telegram."

In that moment, I recognised the wiliness of my opponent. The worst I had expected of her was that she should have announced the Emperor's death, after a due preparation of the public mind for such an event. But she meant to play a deeper game than that; and I knew that she held better cards than I did; that my prospect of winning the game was small. It was to be hoped the third party in the game, if it existed, held a strong enough hand to turn defeat to victory.

"——," I said, "that's a spurious emperor at Cambaluc. The real one is in my house. I know I can't prove it, but I give you my sacred word of honour that what I say is true."

"I think I will go and see if Lord —— will not give you an interview," said —— rather hurriedly, "I am sure he would wish to deal with such a serious matter himself."

Naturally enough —— did not want to tell me I was a lying lunatic, though it was plainly what he thought. Doubtless it was also his opinion that Lord —— had better administer the information in person, and could do so with greater effect. That courteous old gentleman rose to his feet, when I came in, and stood towering over me with a benevolent smile as he shook hands. I told my story over again to this new audience, using exactly the same words, and resisting every temptation to improve on my first recital; for I am always careful about this, holding that it is the best way to carry conviction. The Foreign Secretary listened as courteously as his subordinate, but he was obviously quite as unconvinced.

"It was on the 26th of September that this happened?" he asked, as I finished.

"Yes, Lord——"

"Yet on the 19th of October, the Emperor of Cathay received a visit from Doctor von Kramm of the German Legation."

"Pardon me, my lord," I interpolated, "but had this German doctor ever seen the Emperor before?"

"Well, no, he had not."

"*I had,*" I replied.

There was a moment's silence, during which, I suppose, the minister was framing some final reply with which to send me about my business; during which his secretary

gazed abstractedly at a bluebottle drumming on a pane; and during which I wondered if ever man were placed in my position before.

"You must see, Mr. Randolph," said the Minister at last, "this question raises a somewhat serious diplomatic difficulty. Our relations with Cathay are not such that we can accuse her of the very serious crime you are convinced she has committed. Neither—forgive me—have we enough evidence to support the accusation. You know that no very great reliance can be placed on the veracity of Celestials, and you yourself do not seem very confident of that of the mandarin Wu-Chow. Meanwhile, you have admitted that you only saw the Emperor once, and that several years ago. It is possible, is it not, that the personal peculiarities which you quote, might be found in another man of the same nationality? Identity is an extremely difficult thing to establish, even under the most favourable circumstances. Against this, we have an overwhelming amount of evidence that the Emperor is still in Cathay, where he has been seen by a gentleman whose word is as unimpeachable as your own. We may easily believe that the venal Government of Cathay with the Empress Ah-Seu at the head, has practised a fraud on this honourable gentleman, but we cannot possibly prove that it is the case without the co-operation of persons who are out of reach, such as his Royal Highness Prince —— of ——, whom I believe to have been received by the Emperor, and the *chefs de mission* now at Cambaluc——"

"Whom, I would have you notice, have not been lately received at the palace," I interpolated.

"It is not customary in Cathay to receive a minister unless when presenting his credentials; and even this is quite a recent practice," said Lord —— quietly.

"Well, Lord——, I admit that my statements sound wildly improbable, and that I have not sufficient evidence to prove anything, except the fact of our pursuit by the Russian torpedo-boat," I said. "To me, this latter argues a strong presumption that the Russian admiral was aware of whom we had on board, or at any rate that we had some one on board who was of importance to Cathay. I cannot bring myself to believe that he would have committed himself to such violent measures without some very urgent reason. Also to me, the action taken by the Empress and court is a very strong proof that the real Emperor is known to be beyond their reach. The Empress intended the Emperor to die. She would have carried out her intention, and announced first that he was ill, then dying, and finally dead, only for the fact that he had escaped her hands. By setting up a spurious emperor in his place, she successfully throws discredit on my statement. All this is very plain to me."

"I entirely follow your line of argument, Mr. Randolph," said the Minister courteously. It didn't much matter whether he believed it or not. "But all I can say is that I am afraid Her Majesty's Government will be unable to take any steps to recover the throne of Cathay for its legitimate occupant. This I am sure you can see for yourself."

Of course I knew I had lost the trick. True to my principles, I let it go with a smile on my face.

"Very likely events will soon bring the truth to light," I said cheerfully, resolving to wait and observe the direction in which the cat would jump. "Meanwhile I must apologise for having trespassed on your valuable time. Good morning, my lord."

"Good morning, Mr. Randolph," he answered, holding out his big hand; "I am sorry now to have been able to

assist you in the matter. I will believe with you that time will solve the difficulty."

But the burning question was : What the dickens was I to do with an emperor whom nobody would believe to be an emperor at all?

CHAPTER VIII

IMPERIAL OPINION ON CHECKS, CHIFFONS, AND OTHER MATTERS

IT was all very well for Lord — to dismiss me and my statements to oblivion with a casual expression of his personal goodwill; but the more I reflected, on my way home to Bryanston Square, the more intolerable my position appeared. I had been told in so many words that I was a liar, and what was more, I perceived that I had no means of convincing anybody that I was not one. This was extremely unpleasant, for I have always enjoyed a reputation for being truthful; and I think it is quite deserved, that, in fact, I sometimes carry my love of veracity too far, but invariably to my own detriment and not to other people's. In the case in hand, this would be so entirely. My setting up an impostor as a claimant to the throne of Cathay could do no such serious harm to any one (except perhaps to the impostor), as to myself. For me, it would mean at the best great expense and worry, and would earn for me the name of being a maniac, with a turn for a peculiarly unprofitable form of mendacity, and as nobody wishes to be thought a liar when he is truthful, and a lunatic when he is sane, I was annoyed. I did not realise at that time what it would mean at the worst.

When I stalked into the room in Bryanston Square,

which stands for smoking-room, study, and library, all in one impartially, a little room lined with leather and cedarwood, I found the Emperor sunk down in the very deepest armchair over the fire, with his feet on the fender and a resigned look on his face. My clothes fitted him very badly, and added to the forlorn, out-of-his-proper-place appearance which he presented. He looked round as I came in, and spoke fretfully.

"Where have you been? I thought you would not leave me alone so soon."

"I am sorry, sire," I said, no more ruffled than I should be with the petulance of a child. The poor little devil wasn't like other people; I don't believe sovereigns are, as a rule; they want humouring. "I had to go and see my sister on business, and I did not think your Majesty would be up before I got back. I also had to go to the Foreign Office to tell them of our arrival."

"Foreign Office—what is that?" he asked indifferently.

"The bureau for foreign affairs—the Tsung-li-Yamen," I explained with brilliant inspiration. "The Liu-Pu-Shang-shu" (head of board) "is Grand Vizier of the Queen, and has control of the Privy Council, so you see, sire, he was the person to apply to in order that the English Government may know your Majesty is in England."

"But why did you not tell the Queen of England?" he asked, rather fretfully; "she would have given me a pavilion of her palace, and you would have come too."

"The Queen is not in London just now, sire." I thought it was of no use to explain that I had not the same access to our Sovereign Lady as to Lord —. He might have gathered as much from a recollection of his own rigid etiquette at Cambaluc, but then he looked upon me as an all-powerful, not to say magicianly, person, before whom all the rulers of the earth were as dirt.

"I am afraid, besides," I added, "that your Majesty will find a state of things for which you are not prepared. I don't think the Queen will put you up in Buckingham Palace at present, because—well, because I cannot convince Lord —, I mean her chief adviser, that you are the Emperor of Cathay at all."

He looked at me blankly with widespread eyes.

"But whom does he think I am, then?" he asked at last.

"I haven't an idea. He did not give me that information. He merely conveyed to me politely that I was indulging in flights of fancy which, in official circles, was useless for all practical purposes."

"But I can prove that I am myself," exclaimed the Emperor.

"How, sire? It is the most difficult thing in the world to do, and I should like to know how it could be done in this case."

"I will go to the Queen, and tell her," he returned, impatient at my apparent denseness.

"Very sound, sire. But, unfortunately, in the first place, the Queen would not receive you, and, in the second, she would not believe you if she did."

He drew himself up, and his sad little depressed air fell from him like magic; he looked the picture of offended majesty.

"The Son of Heaven speaks, and he cannot be doubted," he said.

"Ah, sire, but we are in England now!"

I set to work to explain to him as well as I could the situation of affairs. It took me a great deal of time; in fact, I heard Williams drumming on a gong to announce luncheon before I had finished. But I think he grasped the idea by slow degrees. He was perfectly intelligent,

though naturally the workings of his mind were biassed by his upbringing and hereditary tendencies ; it stands to reason that a man cannot be educated as an Oriental, and learn Western habits of mind in a month or so. Only once he tried to interrupt me.

"But I have the imperial ring of Cathay," he exclaimed.*

"Stolen," I replied briefly ; and by this time he understood enough to see that I was voicing the English Government, and not my own opinions, and also not to be offended. He stood no more on his dignity, recognising, I suppose, how little use it was to him in this barbarous land ; only at the end of my harangue he looked up at me and said pathetically :

"But, Louis, I am I."

"I know, sire," I said reassuringly, "I only wish the Government knew it as well as I do. They would reinstate you on your throne in no time in that case."

At that his face changed a little, and the shadow of his imperial look came back.

"I would not ask the English to take me back," he observed, "the Cathayans must call me."

I thought it to the last degree improbable that they would do so, but I did not want to disturb his illusions ; moreover, in dealing with these Mongolian races, it is only the totally unexpected that happens. I did not know whether his Celestial Majesty thoroughly understood the hopelessness of the situation or not, neither did I stop just then to inquire. The clock on the mantelpiece, Williams' gong in the hall, and my own sensations combined to assure me that it was luncheon-time, and I withdrew from the imperial presence somewhat hastily, only to intercept Williams on the mat.

"Lord Tralee, sir," remarked that model servant, with equanimity undisturbed and countenance as wooden as

possible. At the same time a footman hastened forward to answer the front door, at which the bell was wildly pealing.

"I think you know my niece Violet, don't you?" I asked of Tralee, as I waited in the hall to receive that young lady.

Before I heard his answer, to which I was indeed perfectly indifferent, Violet advanced upon us, a dainty little figure in green cloth, with a shady hat on her head, and a look almost expressive of uneasiness and anxiety on her face.

"Good morning again, Violet," I said, "you are strangely reminiscent of a billiard table. Is it the fashion, or merely your own fancy, to affect this rakishness of costume?"

But she did not respond with counter personalities as usual.

"I feel rather frightened, Louis," she remarked, "I am not used to these very grand people you seem to pick up on your way round the world."

"If you mean Tralee, please don't flatter him so much, or he will begin to think he is of value," I observed.

"I don't mean Lord Tralee, of course," said Violet, shaking hands with that Irishman in the most affable manner. "But do tell me," she resumed, "need one stand on ceremony with your Emperor?"

"Try not to, that's all," said Tralee, grinning.

"Must I make a curtsey?" asked Violet, in a very small voice.

"Of course," I answered decidedly; "also you must be prepared for all sorts of things, and remember that his ways are not our ways. Very likely he may refuse to let you sit down in his presence, as you are only a woman."

"Oh, how disgraceful!" cried Violet, with a blaze of most becoming pink in her face; "I shall go away."

"Nonsense, don't be absurd, and waste the food," I returned with severe economy. "Tralee, take her into the dining-room, and keep her quiet."

On the *Flosshilde*, I had got into the habit of announcing meals to the Emperor, and as he was so easily appalled by strangers, I did not like to leave this office to Williams; besides, between the study and the dining-room, I had to explain about Violet, and prepare to vanquish any objection Chin-Wang might have entertained with regard to her presence. Contrary to expectation, he took the fact quietly, and seemed to see at a glance that she was not very alarming.

"This is the daughter of my brother, sire," I remarked, as soon as we reached the dining-room; I was not sure that he might not misinterpret the word niece.

"She looks very old to be that," observed the Emperor, in tones of polite interest. Tralee gave an unnaturally loud cough in the background, and Violet darted a furious look at innocent me. The Emperor, totally unaware that he had not said something rather flattering than otherwise, took the nearest chair with an equal bland unconsciousness that he was again sinning against Occidental etiquette.

"Tra-Lee will sit here on my left hand," he said, tapping the table autocratically.

By this means, as the Emperor always sat on my left, a large pot of ferns was interposed between him and Violet, and behind these sheltering branches, her very unusual fit of shyness rapidly wore off. Tralee's first few tempts at conversation fell flat, but when I took up the ball and made it bounce perseveringly, she very soon joined in, especially as by peeping under the fern fronds,

she discovered that the Emperor's luncheon was a matter of business which occupied his entire attention, to the exclusion of everything else. This, I hasten to add, was not from greed, but from a still imperfect mastery of knife and fork.

"I am so disappointed in you, Miss Randolph," remarked Tralee at the roast joint stage, "I was expecting to hear you say you were glad we were back."

"I am ashamed," I observed, "to hear any man expecting so unmaidenly a thing of my niece as to rejoice at his return. My niece missed *me* very much when I was abroad, but that is quite a different case."

"Well now, I don't understand that," said Tralee, "I should think Miss Randolph would tell us another story."

Tralee is not good at repartee.

"She wouldn't indeed," I rejoined, shaking my head, "I am useful as well as ornamental, you see."

"Yes," put in Violet demurely, "there is nothing so nice to take one about as a nice little callow young uncle."

"Don't speak of me by these glorifying epithets," I said, "you will make me proud."

"It is not possible to glorify you, Louis," put in the Emperor suddenly, speaking for the first time.

"I thank your Majesty for the ambiguous compliment," I returned.

"You do not understand me, but I understand you very well," said the Emperor, and lost interest in everything except a rice pudding, which was now offered to him.

"I am glad to hear this," I remarked, "it is a blessing somebody understands me thoroughly, as there are a great

many things about myself which are baffling even to my shining intelligence."

"Then ask the doctor who is so learned," suggested Violet, who detests Pilkington and never misses a fling at him. "Did he try to teach you the first principles of everything on the *Flosshilde*, Lord Tralee? He had plenty of time and opportunity."

"Yes, it was awful," said the ungrateful Tralee, "I never was in such knowledgable company in my life. Randolph knows evrything about all the peoples and languages under the sun, and Samuel knows all about everything else; so, as there's nothing left for me to know, I make a point of knowing nothing."

"Oh, most lame and impotent conclusion!" I put in, disgusted by the way he grinned, as if he thought he had said something witty.

"You are intolerable when you quote poetry," said Violet.

"That's only because you never know where my quotations come from," I retorted.

"I think it is time for me to go," said Violet, looking pensivly into her empty coffee cup.

"By no means," I returned; "the chief object of your coming has not been discussed."

"And pray what was that, unless it was the benign and civilising influence of my charming society?" asked Violet sweetly.

"The Emperor's new clothes," I replied.

I am now in a position to report on the sensations of a mother choosing her daughter's trousseau. But I trust the brides to be are more tractable than my Emperor, and exercise more forbearance than Violet, otherwise a mother with many daughters has a trying time of it.

I began with lighthearted rashness by telling the Emperor

that he might choose the colours and stuffs for his clothes, and that I would order them ; and in the privacy of my smoking-room I produced a whole shop-full of patterns and a tailor man to take down orders and keep an eye on our selections. I thought the Emperor would be bored with the affair, and leave it all to Violet and me ; but I was entirely mistaken. Probably the choosing of clothes and such small excitements were the chief solace of his monotonous life in his prison-palace at Cambaluc. At any rate, he was so much interested that he forgot to be shy of Violet or the tailor man. He began by feeling all the patterns, and complaining that our Western ideas of habiliments were coarse in the extreme.

"But your Majesty can't dress in silk over here," I objected, and I saw the tailor stare with wild surprise at my form of address. "You would find it much too cold."

"It is cold in the winter at Cainbaluc," said he, unconvinced.

"What do you say, Violet?" I asked, turning helplessly to my niece.

"Blue serge," said Violet promptly. "If ever I am asked what a man looks best in, I say blue serge. It's smart without being loud, and appropriate to both town and country. And I think it would suit—er—er—his Majesty—very well."

"I object," said Tralee ; "those colours have cost me more than his Majesty's worth."

"What do you mean?" asked Violet.

"Blue and yellow, the Duke of Amesbury's racing colours," grinned Tralee.

This I need hardly mention was aside. I glared at them both, and returned to the Emperor, who had got hold of a large packet of tweeds, and was rubbing them

up and down saying that they were "very stiff and cutting."

"They are Caledon tweeds," said Violet, with authority, rising, coming forward, and leaving the ribald Tralee in the corner. "The Scotch people say they are harsher than the Harris tweeds, and the Irish people say reverseways. If you have the luck to be English, you pay your money and you take your choice. They look nice in the country."

"You think of nothing but looks, in common with the rest of your frivolous sex," I remarked. "How about usefulness?"

"It depends on whether you are going down to Blatchford or not," said Violet. Blatchford is my country place.

"Fire away and choose, sire," I said, for about the tenth time, secure that the Emperor would not understand the peremptory form of address. And, as usual, he chose the most violent colours he could find, and we had to use our utmost combined diplomacy to persuade him not to terrify all beholders.

"But I like flower-bright colours," he said, obstinately.

"There's no reason why he shouldn't have as gorgeous coloured smoking suits as he likes, Louis, and made of satin, brocade, anything you choose," suggested Violet.

"My relative, you are a genius," I responded enthusiastically, and made haste to pacify the Emperor, who, on his side, looked upon her as something supernatural.

"How do you know all this?" he asked, turning to her; "are you married?"

"Not at present, sire," answered Violet, and I could see the corners of her demure mouth tremble.

"Why not?" he demanded, unsuspicuous of his own unconventionality.

"Oh!" said Violet with a sudden laugh, "because I am looking for perfection, and I haven't found it yet."

Tralee and I stood recovering from our amaze—the Emperor's sudden development of forwardness, when the loud and throaty tones of the imperturbable William were heard at the door:

"'Er ladyship's carriage 'as called for Miss Randolph."

"I have thousands of things to say to you, Louis," exclaimed Violet hastily, as Tralee helped her into her fur coat, "and no time at all to say them in. *Am I* coming to Blatchford for Christmas? do put me out of suspense."

"You will please yourself," I replied; "meanwhile don't forget our play engagement."

"Oh, I had, quite! What fun! Good-bye! Thank you so much, Lord Tralee. Tuck in my sleeves, please," hurried out Violet in little jerks, as she disappeared from the room. In spite of her errors, which are many, and her sins, which are heinous, Violet always takes all the brightness with her when she goes.

Tralee very soon asserted that he wanted to "go and see a man," and I suggested to the Emperor that we should inspect the present circumstances of Wu-chow. Chin-Wang assented without as much enthusiasm as I should have expected that old mandarin to inspire in him, considering that the old bundle of fraud did undoubtedly save his sovereign's life, and was his only friendly subject within reach. However, it not being my business to dictate sentiments to my Emperor, I merely called a cab without further delay. It was practically the Emperor's first drive through London, as on the evening of our arrival he had been too tired to notice anything, and he was half beside himself with fright all the way from Bryanston Square to Piccadilly, clutching my arm at every corner, and shutting

his eyes like a child whenever an omnibus lumbered past us. . . I remembered hearing when I was at Cambaluc, that according to court etiquette, the Emperor must always drive straight, be there never so many obstacles to be laid flat with the ground ; the houses of the poor must be swept from his path, and the poor themselves fly, hiding their profane faces, lest they should catch a glimpse of the Son of Heaven. I had forgotten all about this when I asked the Emperor to come out with me.

At Witt's Hotel he would hardly face the porter, and I had to grip him tightly by the elbow to prevent his turning tail on the spot ; luckily, all nations and colours are too common in crowded Piccadilly to attract observers, and I towed the Emperor into comparative privacy behind the glass doors without exciting public curiosity. He forgot his alarm the next minute when I got him into the lift, which amused him so much that he insisted on being taken up and down two or three times over, till the lift-boy could no longer exercise any control over his facial muscles, and burst out laughing.

When at last I persuaded Chin-Wang to leave his new toy and accompany me to Pilkington's rooms, we found that practitioner arguing violently with Wu-Chow, who insisted on sitting on the floor with all the blinds down, and praying in a loud and sustained manner that he might die. When the old mandarin saw his sovereign, he ceased from these spiritual exercises, and crawled on hands and knees to our feet.

"I have seen the Son of Heaven once more," he remarked to the carpet ; "I am content."

"Glad to hear it," said the scornful Samuel, "the old image has been going on like this all night. It is enough to make one sick."

I had long left off expecting Wu-Chow to behave sensibly,

so I took these new departures more quietly than the indignant doctor, merely suggesting that he should bring the old incumbrance up to my house to dinner. He thought he should never be able to get Wu-Chow downstairs.

"Then take him in the lift," I suggested, laughing. "We've had a great time in the lift, haven't we, sir?"

"Let us go back," suggested the Emperor promptly; "I do not see why I should visit Wu-Chow, as if he were the son of a king. Let us go in the little hanging box again."

"I must see you some time, Samuel," I exclaimed, rather distracted, as the Emperor took hold of my arm and pulled me away impatiently. I wanted to tell Pilkington about my visit to the Foreign Office, but it was evident I was going to be whirled away to perform more lift journeys.

"I'd come up and see you," said Pilkington, "but what should I do with the old man?"

"Oh, confound the old man!" I returned, "lock him in and leave him—(Yes, yes, sirc, I'm coming.) He won't come to any harm, and you can't sit looking at his ugly old face all day. (All right, sirc, all right!) I'm up a tree, I tell you, and you must come and show me how to get down again. God save the Emperor! if he isn't gone! By-bye," and I rushed down the passage after his Celestial Majesty, who seeing nobody about, and therefore feeling very brave, had started to his beloved lift on his own account.

The short November day was closing in, and when the turnings of the streets and the faces of the passers-by were veiled in comparative darkness, the Emperor was much less terrified. Besides, he was still weak and the emotions of the day had worn him out; on arriving at my house, he sat down in the biggest armchair of my smoking-den,

and was nearly asleep when Williams brought in the lamps.

"Will you see Miss Theodora and Master Francis, sir?" asked that exemplary domestic, without undue hurry, as he drew the curtains.

"Are they there?" I exclaimed, dropping the *Times* which I had been reading by firelight. "How dare you keep my great-niece and nephew waiting? Show them in at once."

There was a gurgling childish laugh at the door, a scurrying patter of feet, and two little figures darted into the room and flew at me. There were two shrill screams of "Uncle Louis! Uncle Louis!"—a dignity to which I was never promoted by my real nephew and nieces—and two small but solid weights were hurled recklessly into my arms, before I remembered the Emperor's presence.

"I beg your pardon, sire," I said, "I forgot that perhaps your Majesty does not like children. A great many people think them tiresome little brats after all."

The Blessed Damozel threw her small chin up in the air.

"I don't care if they do!" her shrill determined voice announced.

But the Emperor was leaning forward in his chair and staring fixedly at Cuckoo.

"Children please me," he said gravely, "and Mang-t'ze says the great man is he who has not lost his child heart. Will you speak to me, little son?"

I gave Cuckoo a push, but it was not necessary, for he is a confiding little chap, and he ran across the hearthrug at once.

"*Dood-evenin'*," he remarked cordially, "is you welly well to-day?" and having paved the way thus, he added, "I likes you :" and putting his arms round the Emperor's

neck in a most friendly manner, sealed the expression of his opinion with a kiss.

I expected Chin-Wang to repulse the unduly familiar infant without delay, but on the contrary he was perfectly delighted, and lifted Cuckoo on to his knee as gently as if he had been used to children all his life. They were the firmest friends from that moment.

Where Cuckoo led the way, the Blessed Damozel could never allow herself to lag in the rear. But she was four years older than her brother and as much more self-conscious ; she did not offer to embrace the Emperor.

These children are the legacies which my eldest niece Theodora and poor George Clifford left, with little else beside, to their grandmother's care, and the most superficial account of my own life and that of the Emperor Chin-Wang in England would be incomplete if these innocent angels were left unmentioned. Theodora was nearly seven, and it was I who was guilty of first calling her the Blessed Damozel ; her grandmother declared it a shocking appellation, but an intimate acquaintance with Miss Clifford's character confirmed me, as well as her Aunt Violet, in a belief in its appropriateness to her amazing aptitude for wickedness in every form. She was less regularly good-looking than her brother Francis (who was of the seraphic type), and no one but I considered her half as attractive. Cuckoo's virtues were all on the surface, but the Blessed Damozel was one of those sirens who sit apart in a dark cavern weaving spells for the souls of men ; everybody liked Cuckoo at first sight, but the Blessed Damozel had to be known to be appreciated, and known very well, so that her surface vices were forgotten in the contemplation of her sterling and generally remarkably well concealed excellencies ; Cuckoo was born to the glory of the eldest son, to be made much of all his life and praised for

kindly coming into existence, and the Blessed Damozel was among the first to try and spoil her brother. Therefore a doting great-uncle was often offended by the difference made by strangers and superficial observers between the two children, and railed at it continually, like Don Quixote tilting at windmills.

CHAPTER IX

A QUESTION OF CHALLENGE

I DID not like to overtax the Emperor's rather weak brain with too many fresh impressions at a time, so for the next few days I abstained from frightening him by another drive in broad daylight round perilous corners. Instead I took him into our quiet little square garden, and let him accustom himself to the sight of an occasional passer-by; he soon became quite *blasé* (for he was an adaptable little beggar), and could look a messenger-boy in the face without flinching. At first he was fascinated by the crossing-sweeper, and would stand for full five minutes at a stretch, watching from behind the bars of the garden gate the plying of the magic broom. When I gave the crossing-sweeper a penny one day, he was delighted, and insisted on my incurring this expense daily; whereby I rose high in the estimation of the crossing-sweeper, who was Irish and blessed both me and the Emperor loudly every day as we passed.

On the second day, a young lady began to learn bicycling in the square, instructed by a man in a peaked cap, who walked beside her firmly grasping her round the waist. As soon as he was convinced that she was not mad, the Emperor used to watch her from a safe distance, and was exquisitely amused if she came to grief.

"Will she fall down? I hope very much she will fall."

down," was his invariable remark, as he followed with his eyes her erratic evolutions and unbridled waverings from the path.

There was a small and very solemn child which used to play all by itself in the square garden, dragging a wooden horse on wheels that shrieked excruciatingly, while its funereal-looking nurse paced slowly up and down the gravel paths, darning a stocking which never seemed to get finished. It—the child, not the stocking—became painfully interested in the Emperor, building, doubtless, around his personality some strange romance, as children will; it made a practice of pursuing us, squeaking wooden horse and all, as we strolled round the garden, and staring at us with eyes like saucers and a mouth like an open oven. This interested observer, the bicycling neophyte, and ourselves were the only *habitues* of the quiet little garden, and we never exchanged any conversation. Only once I heard the shrill, solemn voice the child uplifted to its nurse.

"Look there, Nanna, there they come!"

And the woman transferred her eyes from her stocking to the Emperor, and shook her head dismally.

"Ah, poor gentleman!" I heard her say; "I've seen a many took that way. It brings 'em to their coffins in a year, my dear; you mark my words—in a year, at most."

A depressing enough companion for a child, one would think.

In a few days' time, I thought the Emperor sufficiently accustomed to the normal sights and sounds of London to venture farther afield; thus we traversed the upper reaches of the Park and found them desolate, as became the time of year. As his first shyness wore off, the Emperor became interested in all he saw. He asked an untold quantity of questions, sometimes childish, but

generally intelligent, and it never seemed to occur to him to be ashamed of his ignorance.

"I am supposed to know everything," he said gravely to me, "and I do not."

All the same he was not as interested as I expected him to be ; he seemed unable to feel enthusiasm, only inquisitiveness ; and when he was bored by much that seemed to him incomprehensible, he showed it without disguise. He had little endurance of body or mind, and no idea of feigning a sentiment if he had it not. I was almost always out of my reckoning in dealing with him. If I treated him as a child, he would show that he could judge and observe like a man ; if I spoke to him as to another intelligence on my own level, he would sink away into hopeless depths of unreason and irrationality. Where I expected him to show interest or enthusiasm, he looked bored ; when I thought he did not understand what was passing, he gave evidence of complete comprehension. At times, with the Celestial contempt for an Occidental point of view, he would not take the trouble to put himself in our place ; at others, he seemed to be taking pains to look from our standpoint. I never could be certain beforehand of his attitude toward current events, and I suppose, being differently organised myself, I did not make sufficient allowance for the delicacy of his physique and the phlegmatic turn of his mind.

I got quite wild at times over my attempt to make him admire *something* ; I forgot that he had spent all his life in the most beautiful palace in the world, surrounded by art treasures beyond compare, among unknown splendours ; and that doubtless all he saw looked small and mean by comparison.

To us English, our native land seems so naturally superior to every other, that, though we may admire alien

beauties, we always give the *pas* to those which are home-grown. The English sun is seldom hot, and often invisible, so we say that sunshine is unhealthy, enervating, garish. London is an ugly metropolis, a city of mean streets, with a climate of the worst, and such merits as it has are overhung by black smoke ; so we tell ourselves nobody expects towns to be beautiful, and it is a waste of time to build handsome buildings. I have some claim to consider myself a citizen of the world ; but I freely admit that when any one cries down the meanest thing that is English, I instinctively look upon that person as weak in the intellect.

As soon as he got over his terror of driving in the streets, I took the Emperor to see the Houses of Parliament and Westminster Abbey, and told him as many stories as I could think of to impress his mind as to their importance. He disconcerted me by saying that he did not approve of housing "the Privy Council" so nobly, "it would make them think they were all kings," and that he should prefer personally to be buried where he could see the sun, instead of inside a temple ; he added that the Temple of Heaven at Cambaluc was, to his mind, more beautiful than Westminster Abbey, for there was more light, and the bells made more noise. At St. James's Palace, he admired the sentries more than the structure, and was not in the least impressed by the history I invented about it. He asked the size of Buckingham Palace, and said it was small ; I could not make him understand the object of the Guildhall, or of the Mansion House. In desperation, I showed him the Tower, and told him it was two thousand years old, making this statement from some vague recollections of lines of Gray's, something about "Ye Towers of Julius, London's lasting shame, by many a foul and midnight murder fed." He said he supposed

it was the oldest thing in the country, rather as we might comment on the Capitol at Washington.

But all the while, he was taking in a great deal more than was apparent. He had a most excellent memory, and though occasionally similarity of sound betrayed him into conversational pitfalls, the way he picked up our English idioms was nothing short of marvellous. The Celestials are notoriously quick at languages, theirs being so appalling that I suppose every other seems easy in comparison, and the Emperor was no whit behind his subjects. I tried to learn Tartar at the same time, but found I could not keep pace with him, and in consequence, we generally exchanged ideas in English.

Tired of showing the Emperor ancient monuments which he despised, I took him one night to the Empire to see a particularly gorgeous and well-staged ballet, and to my satisfaction, he was amused. He thought he had seen better dancing than that of the *première danseuse*, but he approved of the colour effects of the ballet. When he, god-like, pronounced it very good, I felt I should have touched the beam of triumph. Instead, I told him how much handsomer the "hall" looked when transformed into a bower of roses in honour of the Shah of Persia. He only asked whether the "theatre-chief" would have made similar decorations to welcome his Celestial self had he known it to be present.

"Of course, sire," I returned thoughtlessly, "only at this time of year there would be no roses, they'd have to do it with chrysanthemums."

He frowned.

"Chrysanthemum is the flower of the Emperor of Nippon, and we are not friends," he said.

Before I could retrieve my false step, an individual whirled into our box, and seized me by both elbows,

giving me a rapturous shake such as a terrier might to a rat which has long eluded him. I gasped between fury at the intrusion, surprise, and bodily anguish, my assailant being a stalwart man with knotted hands like steel, in whose grip I was a mere straw. My fury cooled, my surprise evaporated, but a numbed feeling in my elbows outlived both.

"My dear Randolph, I understood you were in Kam^a chatka."

"My dear Joshua, you always were credulous and a prey to the casual lie monger. Have I your Celestial Majesty's permission to present my friend, Mr. Fiennes?"

His Celestial Majesty's permission had been in a manner extorted by Fiennes' obstreperous method, but if the latter had taken me by storm, my request was an answering thunderbolt, and he staggered into the passage outside the box, overcome with tumultuous emotions.

"But do you really mean it? No humbug? Honour bright? How inconceivable!" he repeated half a dozen times. He ran his hard, gnarled hands through the bushy mane and beard which gave him the aspect of a lion looking out of a bush in a wild state of surprise, and his excitement increased so demonstratively that I expected him to be turned out every minute.

"The Emperor of Cathay! A thing one has heard of since one's childhood and thought as mythical as Prester John or the Seven Champions! A thing one expected to see as little as the Almighty! For heaven's sake explain how these things can be before my brain gives way, and then let me go and grovel at his feet."

"He'll be delighted," I returned, but before I was half way through the story I was already getting tired of telling, my new hearer was flying off at a tangent.

"Look here, Randolph," he exclaimed, with a dart at

my button-hole, "he positively must give me a sitting ! His portrait in the Academy would make my fortune ! Persuade him, I implore you, to assist a deserving artist to name and fame ! "

"Come down to Blatchford for Christmas and try your own powers of fascination," I suggested.

He almost snatched the words out of my mouth.

"Ten thousand thanks ! an invitation I have been fishing for for years. Mind, there can be no withdrawal now. I shall seize the opportunity of painting you as one of your own ancestors."

"What, Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob ?" I asked ; for when references were made to my ancestors, I always ignored my paternal pedigree, to the no small annoyance of the Lady Frances, my sister-in-law, who would like, on her side, to ignore that her father-in-law so far forgot himself as to marry a Jewess of low origin. To the fact that I did not share this snobbish prejudice against my mother's relations, I owe Blatchford and all that is in it to-day.

Fiennes laughed and rushed away like a whirlwind. I always wondered whether his name of Lionel was bestowed on him prophetically, or whether he adapted his appearance to it as a pose, the object of which I do not exactly see. But "what's in a name ?" remarks Juliet, who presumably knew nothing about that or any other matter. Fiennes is never called anything but Joshua.

It was somewhere about this time (I am always a little hazy in my dates), that I was asked to a big dinner, and a semi-political, semi-literary party afterwards. I very seldom dine out, being very greedy and particular, and possessing a *chef* who understands my weaknesses and whom it is a pity to waste ; but on this especial occasion the dinner and the party were in honour of the hero of a recent successful campaign, and as I have a vulgar taste for staring

at celebrities, I decided to go. It happened that two *rencontres* took place that evening, which proved to be knots in the tangled web Fate was taking the trouble to weave about me.

The dinner was over and we had not been egregiously poisoned. The drawing-room was full of celebrities, social, political, literary, and artistic, and nonentities like myself feared to rush in where the great ones were seen to tread. I therefore stood outside one of the drawing-room doors at the top of the staircase, and watched the people coming in for the party. I was talking to Lady Hermione Sidney, an attractive little widow, on whose friendship with myself my sister-in-law always takes the greatest pains to smile, under the mistaken impression that we purpose matrimony at some vague date in the future. Lady Hermione is more lively and graceful than actually pretty, but she had been to that unspecified spot Everywhere and knew that equally indefinite company Everybody, and her commentaries on things in general were cheerful and fresh, if not epigrammatic.

We leant comfortably over the balusters, and made candid and often spiteful remarks on each and all of the guests as they came laboriously up the steep stairs. That is to say that Lady Hermione's remarks were never more than guilelessly truthful, but that mine were flavoured with a strong tincture of ill-nature. London was called by courtesy empty, but there was a fine assortment of miscellaneous persons, celebrated and otherwise, smart or the reverse, for us to exercise our caustic wit upon (I mean *my* caustic wit). A lady, in a Paris gown with ropes of pearls round her neck and hair evidently fresh from the hands of the *coiffeur*, would be seen shoulder to shoulder with a female novelist, shorn of locks, glaring behind *pince-nez*. Illiterate little society butterflies with expressions of

the innocence that is not home grown, gazed wide-eyed at grubby men with grimy collars and flabby faces, who represented the coming Age of Poetry. A genial society cardinal in his picturesque silken robes, stood in juxtaposition with an alert-faced clean-shaven actor. Ambassadors, exchanging opinions in every language under the sun; ladies, who flattered themselves that they stood behind the scenes and pulled the strings in matters political; generals, come to do honour to, and say spiteful things about, a brother general; editors of newspapers, childlike and bland; painters of pictures that nobody buys, writers of books that nobody reads, actors in plays that nobody goes to see—all passed us as we stood. Lady Hermione told me who they all were, and I, in view of her present omniscience and past omnipresence, accepted her explanations with avidity.

"I see Joshua Fiennes in the distance," I remarked, "talking to a fair one with golden locks unknown."

"That's ignorance pure and simple, Mr. Randolph. You must know the coming actress."

"I don't though, from which I suppose that she had begun to come after I had left last summer."

"She is a relation of mine—by marriage of course," interpolated Lady Hermione, "and I must say I am very proud of her."

"Ah, how benevolent are our relations when they give us a chance of shining in a reflected glory! To repeat that nothing succeeds like success would be trite, and to compare the lady's coiffure to paintings of Titian's which neither of us have seen or care about, would be equally so. I have a horror of being trite and of uttering remarks delicately known to certain circles as chestnuts, and as these observations are all I have to make, I will keep silent. You really need no laugh, Lady Hermione, this

is not meant to be funny. What made your relation take to the stage?"

"Love of the art," said Lady Hermione laconically.

"Love of labour lost, you mean," I answered.

"Not lost in her case," returned Lady Hermione, "everybody has been raving about her for weeks. She made a great hit at the St. —— Théâtre this autumn."

I straightened myself with a jerk.

"Tell me," I exclaimed with a total change of voice and manner, "is her name Esmée Sidney?"

"Yes. Didn't I tell you she was a relation?"

"I didn't connect ideas. Well, I am very much interested in the lady. Will you introduce me to her if you find an opportunity?"

As I made this request almost as shamefacedly as if I were a victim of love at first sight, I looked away from Lady Hermione, and caught sight of the Ambassador of Cathay, standing half a dozen yards away. He was of course in national costume, and the type of his face was more hideously and malevolently Mongolian than any I had ever seen. As I met his malignant almond eyes, he turned his head and spoke to an *attaché* following at his heels. The second yellow face was turned in my direction, a second pair of slit-like eyes scrutinised me, and though I was too far away to catch their words, I knew that they knew who I was, and whom I had left behind me in Bryanston Square. I felt that the glove had been thrown down.

"Oh, by the way," said Lady Hermione, at the same moment, "I see the Cathayan Ambassador, and that reminds me, I met Lord —— at dinner the other night, and he told me something so funny about you. Don't you find a Cathayan a very untidy thing to have in your house?"

"Dear lady, your tact is admirable," I returned, and it struck me my remark was a little ambiguous; but what I really meant at the moment was that she had only hinted most delicately at the identity of my imperial guest. "I do not find myself in the least inconvenienced, thank you."

"But is it really——?" she ventured, her curiosity in the ascendant, yet she did not quite dare to explode this question in my face.

"These matters are too deep to touch upon casually," I began, but was interrupted by a diplomatic light whom I blessed fervently. Leaving Lady Hermione in his care, I turned to go away, when I encountered my nephew Giles. I seemed to have floundered out of one conversational quagmire only to fall at once into another, for Giles, instead of avoiding me, came up and asked me in friendly tones how I was, finally suggesting that we should walk to some club or other together.

Giles is an exotic lily of progress, with hair that rarely makes acquaintance with the scissors, and a mouth reminiscent of a rabbit. If he had lived fourscore years earlier, he would have worn turn-down collars and, as an adjutant, a morose demeanour; his modernity displays itself in collars of abnormal height, a twittering voice, and a gentle, ladylike manner. I don't know which of us despises the other most.

"Giles, my relative," I remarked, rushing into the subject as soon as we got out into the street, "I hear you stand in need of congratulations."

"I wish I did," was his unexpected reply.

I was nonplussed.

"Your mother certainly told me——" I began.

"My dear mother," said Giles, in the tone a woolly lamb on wheels might be expected to use "knows nothing about it."

"Your mother," I went on hastily, "asked me to say certain things to you, and I shall say them at once and get them over."

Which I did, without further delay. Giles heard me to the end with perfect placidity.

"My good Louis," he said, in his superior manner, when I had finished, "what can you possibly know about it?"

"Oh, confound it all!" I ejaculated, irritated as I always was at a very early stage in my intercourse with him.

"Your language is most inartistic," murmured my nephew.

"You're a fool, Giles," I said, repeating what I had very often said before, "and an infernal supercilious fool into the bargain. Tell me to shut up and mind my own business as much as you like, but don't put on those idiotic superior airs, as if you were a man of average intelligence."

"How amiable you are!" said Giles.

To a man who takes being called a fool in this way I can have nothing to say.

"I have told you what your mother asked me to pass on to you," I remarked; "as far as I am concerned, I don't care a hang whom you marry. You are bound to do something idiotic some time sooner or later, and if it amuses you to annoy your mother, who wastes a great deal more affection on you than you are worth, it's your look-out. All I've got to say is I am thankful to be done with my part in the matter. Good night."

I like to be as rude as possible to Giles. There is something so exasperating in a person who never resents anything, that they ought to be insulted clear out of this world into the next.

The morning after this encounter, in which the honours of war, if there were any, seem to have rested with Giles,

I having lost my temper, I sent the Emperor out into the square garden with Kwa-Yen to attend him, while I went down to West Halkin Street and took Violet and the children out in the Park. This sort of dissipation the children regarded in the light of a great privilege, so I was careful to dole it out to them at long intervals, lest it should lose its awe-inspiring effect. Of course they were exemplary ; they always are when I have sole control over them. We risked our lives in a daring attempt to navigate the Serpentine ; we threw sticks into the water for stray dogs who knew that we were not their lawful owners, but accepted our evident willingness to please ; we fed ducks already so fat they could hardly waddle to the crusts we offered them ; we performed acrobatic feats on the low railing edging the grass of the Park, on the supposition that it was a tight rope ; and we enjoyed ourselves so much that we did not want to go home to luncheon.

I should have been still less anxious for my morning off duty to come to an end, could I have foreseen that Williams would meet me on the threshold with the portentous words :

"I'm sorry to say as 'is Majesty is nowhere to be found, sir."

CHAPTER X

THE SORROWS OF A SUBMISSIVE SUBJECT

"WHAT?" I yelled, in tones that shook the house to its foundations, and nearly split the panels of the front door. Even Williams changed colour.

"I'm afraid has it's quite true, sir. I can't find 'is Majesty nowhere, neither in the 'ouse nor in the square garden. And Choir-Gin, as 'e's called, 'as gone too."

I bolted upstairs like a skipping goat upon the mountains and' tore open the Emperor's bedroom door without ceremony, which would have been wasted anyhow. To ransack the house from the attics, where squealing housemaids strewed brooms in my way, to the basement, where the *chef* tried to stare me out of countenance for invading his sacred premises, took me about five minutes. At the end of that inconsiderable space of time, I faced the aghast Williams in the hall, and made copious extracts from the Commination Service; next second, I shot out of the still open front door, and hailed a passing hansom.

"Witt's Hotel," I howled through the trap-door in the roof, "and drive like smoke."

It was just possible that the Emperor had been seized with a whim to go and see Wu-Chow, and all the way to Piccadilly I kept industriously telling myself it must be so; but the remembrance of the sinister look which the Cathayan Ambassador cast at me so short a time before,

gave me a horrible feeling that my heart was too small for my body and was rattling about in an empty frame. I whirled up the hotel stairs like a cyclone, and hurled myself breathless against Pilkington's door ; it was locked, and I heard the alarmed voice of Wu-Chow inside.

"Is that the great medicine-man ?"

"No ; is he out ?" I bellowed.

"Ah, it is you, great Excellency ! That is very well ; I will open, and you shall bring flowers to the heart of the mean Wu-Chow like spring returning. The great Magician has gone to visit Tra-Lee."

"Has the Son of Heaven been here ?" I roared. Heads were poked out of doors, and several waiters rushed upstairs at the stentorian sound of the strange tongue.

"No," placidly answered Wu-Chow, fumbling at the door.

"Great Cæsar ! Well, don't open it—never mind—good-bye," I vociferated.

"A little moment, a little moment, great Excellency," entreated Wu-Chow, still rattling the lock.

"No, no, no," I bawled, "I will come back—good morning—I am in a great hurry."

All the doors which showed heads down the passage banged, and the waiters fled like hares ; the hotel people evidently thinking a raving maniac was at large.

In another second I was on my way to Chesham Place, running a remarkably good chance of being taken up for the pungency of my language as I went. For Piccadilly was crowded, and my hansom blocked every few minutes ; undecided pedestrians hovered on pavements and refuges, and selected the exact moment to cross the street when my hansom drove up ; policemen made a point of holding up their hands (looking to my excited and furious fancy like legs of mutton encased in white woollen gloves)

under the nose of my steaming horse. If all the other peregrinators of Piccadilly that afternoon knew what agonies I was suffering, my faith in human nature, small as it is, assures me that they would have given way gracefully and allowed me as clear a path as a fire-engine or as Her Majesty's mails.

Tralee was lunching in a respectable and domestic manner with his mother and a round half-dozen of his innumerable sisters. On this chaste and dignified gathering I burst like a tornado, exclaiming before all else :

"Is Samuel here?"

"No, he was half an hour ago, though."

"Was the Emperor with him?" I demanded.

"No," said Tralee, staring.

"Oh, good Lord! No, I can't stay; much obliged. Thank you, Lady Tralee, I'm afraid I haven't time to lunch. Good-bye, old man; see you again."

"What's there such a hurry for?" asked Tralee placidly.

"I've lost the Emperor," I returned tragically.

"Oh, he'll turn up!" said Tralee, with easy optimism.

"In several pieces, no doubt," I retorted, much more savage than if Tralee had taken it heavily.

Fiennes had a house on the Chelsea Embankment, and this was the next establishment I raided, where I found Fiennes himself and Pilkington discussing luncheon in much luxury.

"I've hunted you half over London, Samuel," I ejaculated, dropping into a chair; for Fiennes, in an agony of hospitality, hardly let me get into the room before he was pressing me to refresh myself.

"Why?" was Samuel's calm inquiry.

"An awful thing has happened; the Emperor has mislaid himself."

"Explain."

Samuel did not mean to be harrowed unnecessarily. When I explained, however, he looked grave.

"What shall you do?" he asked. "Advertise?"

"Advertise?" I yelled. "You must think me a fool! That would be the very way to give the whole show away to those Cathayan Embassy brutes."

"I wish you'd taken him down to Blatchford in the first instance," remarked Samuel, "or that the wretched little beggar had died of pneumonia on the *Flosshilde*."

"Or that we had never picked him up at all," I appended. "I don't need to tell you I wish to Heaven all these things had happened, or hadn't happened. I shall never see the poor little devil again, and I've made a blazing idiot of myself for nothing at all."

"Are you going to take any steps to recover him?" asked Pilkington. "It's like looking for a needle in a haystack, but still——"

"I shall go to Slater's and have detectives sent to keep an eye on the Cathayan Embassy."

"You might wire to Conan Doyle for the address of Sherlock Holmes," chimed in Fiennes; "never was a case where he was so much wanted. Puzzle, find an Emperor among five million human beings, mostly hostile—— Are you going, Louis? Wait a little—let me come too."

"Wait? Not for the whole Empire of Cathay and all that is therein. I wish I was as certain of seeing his Celestial Majesty again as I am of seeing you."

After exhausting the detectives with minute instructions as to what they were to do, I took hansom again, and went in person to inspect matters in the direction of Regent's Park. I walked up and down the opposite side of the street, and watched the great dragon fly of Cathay bellying over the Embassy, wishing madly for a state of

civilisation that would enable me to batter down that decent-looking door, and raid the den of iniquity behind it. At this crisis, I thought a cycle, nay, half an hour, of Cathay well worth the proverbial fifty years of Europe. As I paced the unyielding pavement, I wondered gloomily whether they would kill the Emperor quickly or slowly, or whether they would ship him off to Cambaluc for the Dowager Empress to deal with in person. I inclined to the latter belief. A corpse might be an awkward thing to dispose of, unless they had a private lime-kiln on the premises. But I determined that his Excellency the Cathayan Ambassador should know what trouble meant before he succeeded in getting Chin-Wang out of the house alive ; the Emperor might give in with Oriental fatalism, but I was neither an Oriental nor a fatalist. Having played the game up to this point, I had no intention of throwing down the cards yet ; I still held a few trumps.

I walked up and down the street, and reconnoitred uselessly in the adjacent ones ; looked down areas (which I had no business to do), and up at windows ; stared every passer-by so severely in the face, that each and all were frightened ; and came to the final conclusion that for all the good I was doing, I might be in Bryanston Square. I walked home to work off steam ; when I am preoccupied, I walk very fast, with my head down, fix my eyes on the ground just in front of my feet, and talk to myself. I am aware that this gives me a very insane appearance, but I cannot help it. It was about five o'clock in the afternoon when I inserted my latchkey into the keyhole of my door.

In the course of some five minutes, Pilkington was announced.

"What luck ?" he asked imperturbably.

"None."

"Bad business," said Samuel, sitting down.
Here Tralee was announced.

"The Emperor hasn't turned up yet, I suppose?" he remarked, looking round expectantly.

"As you see," I answered.

"How devilish silly of him."

Now Fiennes dashed into the room.

"Still lost! lost! lost!" he cried; "misfortunes will never cease. First we find an Emperor, and then we lose him. It is easy to see the Fates are women; they give us no peace."

"I've done what I could for you," remarked Pilkington. "I told the waiters at the hotel if they saw or heard of the Emperor, they were to send us word."

"But how will they know it's the Emperor?"

"Well, a thousand Cathayans in European clothes are not likely to come and ask for Wu-Chow or me, are they?" asked Pilkington mildly.

"I've told everybody I've seen to collar any Celestials they may meet, and keep 'em bottled up till further orders!" said Tralee.

"We've all been sifting your haystack for you," chimed in Fiennes, "and we still hope to light on the needle. I told a small gutter-snipe who sometimes sits to me and who knows everything that happens in London, to say nothing of the suburbs, to keep his eyes open."

"I don't hope for much," I remarked; "the Celestials are as deep as a millpond and twice as sticky. If they've got him at the Embassy, the game's up."

"Well, we've no proof that he's in the Embassy," said Pilkington, by way of the most consoling thing he could advance.

"Will you bet about it?" asked Tralee, getting interested.

Fiennes gave the loud roar which stands with him for a laugh.

"You must know Samuel never bets on an uncertainty," he said.

I think Pilkington might have resented this imputation, but that at this juncture, Williams, tremulous, filled the doorway.

"Choir-Gin, sir," he gasped, "he've been found, sir! The detective gentleman, sir."

The detective's report was short and businesslike; a Mongolian, giving his name as Kwa-Yen, had been charged that morning at Marylebone Police Court with assaulting a milkman in Bryanston Square, and in default of any one to answer for him, was decorating the cells at that moment.

"That's our Kwa-Yen right enough," said Pilkington.

"Yes, you see 'Bryanston Square,'" quoted Fiennes.

"But he says nothing about the Emperor," I objected.

"Oh, then Kwa-Yen isn't the Emperor?" exclaimed Fiennes blankly.

"No, you silly ass, of course not. Beg pardon, Joshua, I forgot you didn't know. Kwa-Yen's only the servant I sent out with the Emperor this morning."

"Oh well, where the servant is, there will the master be gathered together," said Fiennes. "What shall you do?"

"Do?" I echoed, "what do you think? Call me a cab, Williams."

"We can't leave the Emperor to pass the night in a police cell," said Pilkington pityingly to Fiennes.

"He doesn't mention the Emperor," I said.

"Reports of this kind are often scrappy," Pilkington suggested.

This did not reassure me. The Emperor was not very substantial, but he certainly counted as a whole Mongolian,

and deserved not to be passed over in utter silence. I could not picture him taking part in the assault, though he had obviously been accessory to it. My misgivings proved to be not unfounded. We (Pilkington came with me) easily found and identified Kwa-Yen, but of his liege lord there was never a trace. I catechised the constables in vain. One Celestial in a day seemed quite enough for them; they had not so much as heard of another, and the unfortunate culprit himself was of no assistance.

"Where is the Son of Heaven, Kwa-Yen?" I asked more in sorrow than in anger, when confronted with that subject of his Celestial Majesty.

"He is with you, great Excellency," replied Kwa-Yen, with confidence.

"I wish to goodness he was! Tell me how it happened."

The Mongolian's story was very simple. He had attended his Celestial Majesty in the august garden (which he appeared to think my personal property and therefore to be spoken of with glorifying epithets). The Son of Heaven had been pleased to look through the bars of the garden gate. A man passed, and stopped, and said something which Kwa-Yen, being some paces away, did not hear, but which was doubtless an insult. Then the Son of Heaven honoured Kwa-Yen by telling him to avenge the divine wrongs; he said: "Kill this man;" and Kwa-Yen did his best. But a man in blue interfered and spoilt all. Which history, though concise, was unfortunately useless.

"I do not think the English are a very understanding people, great Excellency," remarked he, "they should have known that the will of the Son of Heaven must be done."

"They are born fools, my friend," I said feelingly, "but I will soon set that all right. You will come up top after all."

"Am I to be executed, Excellency?" he asked impassively.

"No, no, certainly not. The worst that can possibly happen is a fine, and I will see the Chih-hsien" (magistrate) "about that."

He received this reassurance with a stony countenance, but I think he must have been relieved, having evidently made up his mind he was to die.

Pilkington and I returned to find Tralee and Fiennes still in my house; in fact, they remained there till the imminent necessity for dressing for dinner engagements drove them away. Before they left, I received the reports of the detectives who had been employed all day in watching the Embassy; they were vague, but seemed to point to the Emperor not having been at the official residence of his representative. I did not know whether to feel encouraged or disheartened, but at any rate, I was not inclined to spend a solitary evening, a prey to my over-vivid imagination. I went to dine at a club.

CHAPTER XI

THE BOTHERS OF A BEAR-LEADER

IT was a foggy evening, and the lamps loomed through the haze like sick moons ; the cabs which passed at intervals down the street, looked like phantom chariots, and an angry buzzing denoted the approach of an occasional motor-car. On the pavement (so much more graphically named by our American cousins the "side-walk"), men were like trees walking ; I stood for one moment on the steps of the club, and looked out into the raw, misty night. Only two little weeks ago, I was lounging in a deck-chair on the sunny Mediterranean, listening to Pilkington's platitudes ; now the dense air of St. James' Street was rasping my lungs and exasperating my temper. Mother England does not always give a judicious welcome to her wanderers.

I crossed the street by means of the refuge ; I noticed (for not much that comes within my range of vision escapes me) that a rather huddled-up and possibly intoxicated person, whose sex could not be guessed by its muffling garments, was leaning endearingly against the lamp-post. I wondered at the time why the constable standing where St. James' Street and Piccadilly meet, did not move this freak on.

My dinner had been excellent, and I had not done it injustice. Wherefore I ought to have self exalted in spirit

and benignant in disposition as I walked down Piccadilly. But the state of affairs was such that a single dinner, however refreshing, could do little or nothing to diminish its effect. My lucky star was certainly in abeyance just now ; I had lost the game, and an inoffensive life into the bargain, and if true to my ruling principle, I exhibited a grinning countenance to the world, I could not help the ignominious feeling of defeat being uppermost.

I was well beyond Walsingham House, abreast of the Green Park, when I heard steps behind me. It would seem a foolish and superfluous thing to say in a main artery of the world's metropolis at the comparatively early hour of ten o'clock ; yet there was a strange insistence in this particular patter on the pavement. I looked behind me, but saw nothing except an apparent tree looming in the fog, just too far behind to make out distinctly. I turned abruptly to the right, and crossed the street with some hurriedness ; the tree crossed the street too, waiting to let a hansom pass first. I walked on ; the tree loomed after me at a measured distance. I stopped ; the tree (allowing for mixity of metaphor) came to anchor. Convinced now that I was being followed, I put on steam, and barged ahead at lightning rate ; but the creature behind was marvellously active. I turned, rather suddenly, up Par^t Lane ; the patter, patter was still heard on the pavement behind. Crossing over to the park side, I slackened ; now the patter came closer, and I breathed again. I had evidently been deluding myself. A muffled-up figure came abreast of me.

"Good evening," said a low voice.

I opposed a stony silence to this ingratiating remark.

"I daresay I could give you news of something that is lost," went on the monotonous tone, hardly above a whisper.

We passed under a lamp-post at that moment, and my monotonous interlocutor, dropping a sort of muffler from round his neck, turned up his face for a second in the dim misty light. It was a Cathayan.

I sprang off the kerbstone, and ran for my life, but not far. My agile pursuer flew after me at a pace which scarcely seemed human; catching me up, gripping my arm, and dragging me bodily through Stanhope Gate, he said very firmly:

"Mr. Randolph, understand me. I cannot be seen talking to you; therefore I adopt this way of communicating with you."

"Who the deuce are you?" I panted.

"I am the first secretary of the Cathayan Embassy in London— No, do not run away again; I am a loyal subject of his Celestial Majesty. You have heard of one Sung-Taou?"

"Yes."

"I, Mr. Randolph, am his unworthy brother."

And quite as accomplished, I noticed, in a quick irrelevant way, for this Cathayan spoke a most pure and classical English.

"Then," I said with much haste, "the Embassy knows—"

"The Embassy knows all that it wants to know."

"Sir," I said, "I believe myself to be in charge of his Celestial Majesty the Cathayan Emperor. I also believe that this is known at the Embassy."

He gave an ambiguous bow.

"A great deal has come to pass," he remarked, "and more will come. The issue is in the hand of Heaven."

"Look here," I said, "let us speak plainly, as honest men one to another. Can you tell me, on your allegiance

to the Son of Heaven, where his Celestial Majesty is now?"

"The Son of Heaven knows," he began, and I had nearly stamped with impatience when he added: "and he is the only person who does know. If I knew, whom should I tell? The one who preserved his life, or the one who stands in his name at the Court of your Queen?"

"Your language would seem to imply," I said, "that you would tell him who saved the life, not him who would take it—meaning myself, and not the Ambassador of Cathay."

"All will be well yet. Take courage, Mr. Randolph," his hand pressed my arm again.

"Thank you, I don't lack courage," I remarked, "though why you have taken this means to test it, I don't know. However, you can tell the people at the Embassy, and anybody else whom it concerns, that I do not intend to give up the Emperor on any pretext whatever. If it comes to fighting, they will find that I can fight with the best. In this country it is money that is power, and I have got plenty of it, thank God! So you can tell your people I am not in the least afraid of them, nor at all discouraged as to my ultimate success, however black things may look."

But as I made this rather swaggering declaration of war, I felt very little of the confidence I assumed. It was all very well to talk big about not giving the Emperor up, but the affair was slightly beyond my control at that moment.

"I like that, Mr. Randolph, I like that very much," remarked my rather singular companion, "I feel sure you are quite the man for our purpose."

"I am glad you are satisfied," I returned, beginning to get wild. It always rouses me at once, if I think somebody is insulting my intellect by trying to be sarcastic.

"Of course," he went on undisturbed, "it is very gratifying to have a confederate of the temper of yourself. I admit we did not reckon upon it; when we knew that you had rescued the Son of Heaven, we supposed that you would leave him at Chink-a-lan or Hong Kong. We had provided for this. But I think as things have happened, his Majesty will be safer here than nearer home. Of course, I warn you that nothing will be left undone to destroy him or to decoy him away from you—I can tell you we suffered much anxiety during your voyage. We made no doubt you were sunk in the typhoon, and when we heard of you at Hong Kong, there was much thanking of the gods."

To these remarks I listened in great amazement. Then the key to the conundrum was supplied in a lightning jump at conclusions; here, then, was the hitherto unknown player in the game, in the shape of some indefinite party in Cathay, which knew all the cards that were already on the table, and was still watching the play anxiously. But I had no intention of at once recklessly displaying my hand, neither did I entirely trust my companion. He was too outspoken and apparently candid to be quite normal, the Celestial mind being a pit of guile into which you may sink never to touch the bottom, a labyrinth of deception to which no white man has the clue. So all I said was:

"Well, I have weathered a typhoon and distanced a torpedo-boat; it will go hard if I cannot outwit an ambassador."

At this point, my peculiar interlocutor abruptly left me; as he turned away, he stood still a moment and said in a marked manner:

"When you have found the Son of Heaven, you will greet him on behalf of his still faithful subjects."

I wheeled sharply, but the fog had swallowed him up. My momentary feeling of satisfaction at having, as I thought, discovered the long-lost third party, disappeared in a prevailing distrust of all things Mongolian. Thought he could fool me, that reprehensible Celestial, did he? was probably laughing at me now in his baggy sleeve? Let them Hugh that win; the Embassy people might know where the Emperor was, but they would find they had not done with Louis Randolph yet. The Emperor should not leave England alive or dead, if by a mere moving of heaven and earth it could be prevented. You never can tell till you try, how easily heaven and earth can be heaved out of their sockets, so to speak; I never knew myself lack resource, and as I boasted, I hold the source of power.

"I suppose you 'aven't 'eard no news of 'is Majesty, sir?" said Williams, coming into my smoking-room "to see if I wanted anything."

"Not a word, Williams," I said dejectedly; "I swear by all that's holy if ever I set eyes on him again, I'll never let him out of my sight."

"It's a terrible business, sir," said Williams, in a proper tone of respectful sympathy.

"It may alter history," I said portentously.

"Indeed, sir?" returned Williams politely.

I groaned as I thought of this new view of the case. The fact that I should probably figure in history (if at all) as a fool did not trouble me; you can but be what the Creator saw fit to make you, and He obviously modelled me on Don Quixote, and not on the Seven Sages.

"Choir-Gin, sir," said Williams, after a pause, "takes on that orrid, Mrs. Besom" (the housekeeper) "is downright put about on account of 'im."

"I am uncommonly sorry for Kwa-Yen," I remarked.

"I am less concerned for Mrs. Besom, who will probably take care not to be troubled with him much, and I am sorriest of all for his Majesty."

"We must 'ope for the best, sir;" uttered the discreet one.

"And be prepared for the worst, eh, Williams? Well, you may go; I shan't want anything more."

I took a novel off the revolving bookcase, and held it up in front of my eyes, but I did not see a word of it; I lighted a cigarette and laying it down on the edge of a table near my chair, forgot about it; I poured myself out a brandy and soda, and put it down somewhere so that it vanished out of sight. Lying back in my chair and staring in front of me, my mind perceived the depths of my own folly and gnashed its teeth at them.

Here then was the end of all my trouble. For this I had risked everything, life and limb, property and reputation. For this I had thrown lives into the balance of Fate without caring that they were tossed back again, as if Fate did not want to take them now, but would wait till later. For this I had given my reputation as a man of average sense to be torn to ribbons by a censorious press, sensation-catering for a foolish rabble; made myself a laughing-stock to friends and acquaintances of whose intellects I had the lowest opinion; given a half-informed public occasion to hoot. And this was not the worst. I was sorry for myself, deucedly sorry; but my lot was merely galling and unpleasant; what was the Emperor's? Had he not better have died at Cambaluc in the hands of the Empress's tormentors, than tasted the air of the wider world? A bird that chipped the shell in a cage cannot rejoice in freedom like the eagle that has soared towards the sun, the swallow that has followed summer round the world, the gull that dipped wings in the sea.

A child that was born in a mine, to one of those strange underground existences we read of, cannot but blink when brought to daylight ; yet a return to the darkness, a shutting of the cage-door, after be it never so little a glimpse of the world of light and liberty, must be tragedy. Better never know what life has to offer, than be held back from taking it.

I had got fond of the little fellow, as I might of a child that looked to me for everything ; I knew I should miss him. And for him, it all seemed so unnecessary. Luck had been against him all along, and the worst of his life would be his quitting of it. I wished he had died on the *Flosshilde*, passing from life to death without knowing where they melted into one another ; been buried in the sea, where politics and intrigues cannot penetrate to trouble, and where "strange sea-maidens with sad singing lips" murmur their soothing lullabies. Then I would have thrown out Wu-Chow at Hong Kong without remorse ; I would never have figured before Lord — in the humiliating character of a fool telling profitless falsehoods ; I would not have been haunted by a little ghost with sad eyes — What was that ?

I distinctly heard the electric door-bell shrill through the house. Bounding out of my chair, hurling myself through the hall, clawing at bolts and bars, took one minute only. Then the front door sprang wide, and I was on the doorstep, grasping my Emperor in the flesh,

"Come in, come in !" I shouted ; "you have shortened my life."

CHAPTER XII

AMOR VINCIT OMNIA

THEN I saw that his Celestial Majesty was not alone. The astonishing fact broke upon me that his companion was a lady, and an European lady withal—good excellent English, and no fraud about her. In the hurry of the moment, the only thing which occurred to me to say was: “Come in, and have some supper.”

“I hope you will excuse my having come,” she said, and her voice was high-pitched but very musical, “but I was afraid your—your—his—he would not be able to find his way alone.”

“I owe you an eternal debt of gratitude,” I said; “please crown your kindnesses by coming in out of the cold.”

Meanwhile the Emperor was hanging on to my arm like a child, afraid to let me out of touch.

“I am glad to be with you, Louis,” he remarked, “I was most confused.”

“Not nearly so confused as I was,” returned the lady. She laughed, and because her laugh was pleasant, and because my mind was so relieved and light after overweighing heaviness, I joined in and laughed too, like an imbecile, not knowing what I laughed at.

“I must hear the whole story,” I said; “but meanwhile the servants are all gone to bed, so we must forage for our own supper.”

I led the way into my smoking-room, where I found the mouldering stump of my cigarette burning holes in the table, and elsewhere a tray of drinks and biscuits on which the Emperor fell without further ceremony. I poked up the fire, and, suddenly remembering that I had a coffee-making apparatus upstairs, dashed in search of it. When I returned, the stranger lady had laid aside her cloak and something of fleecy white she wore over her head, and was smoothing rebellious locks of hair under a sort of golden snood. Describe her? I could as soon describe the sun. All that I knew, then and ever afterwards, was that there was a something about her, en chaining, arresting, elusive, an unlikeness to the dull pattern on which most of us are cut, an aroma surely divine from its aloofness from common and trivial things.

"My utmost rummaging," I remarked after having attempted it, "will unearth nothing but a tin of biscuits. If you think that with them, and a cup of coffee, and a glass of liqueur, my spirit-case being fortunately in the room, you cannot sustain the vital spark, I will ring up the pampered menials."

"Oh, please don't give yourself so much trouble, Mr. Randolph."

I looked up involuntarily at my name, for the Emperor had not mastered my surname as yet.

"Yes, I know your name," she said, answering my start, "and I feel I am trespassing on your hospitality; I ought to tell you my own at once. I am Esmée Sidney."

Reflections on the smallness of the world would partake of that triteness I am always trying to avoid. I answered in my haste :

"Please never talk of trespassing on my hospitality again. The house is yours, as we used to say in Spain, and I

only wish I had something more adequate in the way of refreshment to put before you."

"But this is a feast fit for a king," she replied gaily.

"I see that, at any rate, it seems to suit an emperor," I observed, for Chin-Wang had not opened his mouth, except to put nutriment into it, since he arrived.

I saw her glance, half-interested, half-dubious, focussing the Emperor, and I immediately added :

"Have you been presented in due form to his Celestial Majesty?"

Then she rippled down into laughter, and with a frank look, answered :

"Please do not challenge me with your eyes. I have made my curtsey."

Now, doubtless, if my sister-in-law, the Lady Frances, had come in at that precise moment and seen our party, she would have held up hands of righteous horror, and her code would have been outraged past all possibility of explanation. But with Esmée Sidney, all minor conventionalities did not seem to exist; for her outlook on the world was so wide that she never perceived the little tangled paths in which her sister-women walk and periodically lose their way. She was so absolutely natural (without being that detestable anomaly, a child of Nature), that what she did always seemed the only right and sensible action to take in the matter, whatever it was. She was too gentle to scorn other people's petty codes, she merely overlooked them, with an inability to focus silly trivialities. It palpably never struck her as odd, let alone as reprehensible, to sit down in the smoking-room of a perfect stranger, and eat his biscuits and sip his green Chartreuse, while listening and responding to his attempts to make himself agreeable. And need I say the perfect stranger, no slave himself to the tyrannous proprieties, was the last

person on earth to draw her attention to the unusualness of the affair? Only he could not help thinking, *en passant*, of the scandalised face Lady Frances would have presented.

During our strange little impromptu supper, I had no difficulty in finding out the whole story of the Emperor's disappearance, partly from the Emperor himself, and partly from Esmée—I must call her Esmée. At first the Emperor's recital tallied with Kwa-Yen's. He had sent that submissive subject to his doom with a word, and showed no remorse for that autocratic act. But he had fully intended to interfere at the moment, and was just making up his mind to order the policeman to set Kwa-Yen at liberty, when that functionary walked his capture off the scene of action. The Emperor followed awhile, but so did a crowd, and Chin-Wang, afraid of contact with loud-voiced, fast-speaking, not very clean human beings, drew back, hesitated, and was lost, literally as well as figuratively. His courage failed him and he turned back; but by this time he was in a street he did not know, and he could neither remember the way he had come nor summon courage to ask. Moreover he had not mastered the name of my square, and the only thing he knew of my house was its number. He tried vaguely to retrace his steps, but as, according to his own account, he turned back whenever he saw anybody coming, he could not have made much progress. However, in the course of his circuitous wanderings, he lighted on a square which he promptly concluded was Bryanston, and found the number equivalent to mine without difficulty, and rang the bell as he had seen me do. The footman who answered the door must have been a very well-bred servant, for he asked no questions, but led the way at once upstairs. But by a coincidence, there was a door on the left of the entrance hall just where the door of my smoking-

room stood, and the Emperor, taking no notice of the servant, opened it, and walked calmly in. He found out his mistake directly when Esmée rose to confront him.

"What did you do, sire?" I asked, as the Emperor seemed disinclined to proceed with his story.

"I did nothing."

"You said something though, I suppose?"

"No, I said nothing. I did not know what to say."

Esmée also, at a considerable loss at the sudden intrusion of a stranger of undoubtedly Mongolian extraction, had remained speechless. A pretty tableau! But the girl recovered herself first, and asked the Emperor if he wished to see her, to which he candidly answered: "No." At hearing this, I burst out laughing.

"But it was true, was it not?" said Chin-Wang.

After this ingratiating avowal, it seemed that he tried to explain himself, but that she did not understand him; I suppose he stammered and stuttered, and not improbably relapsed hopelessly into Tartar, as he generally did when frightened. But by exercising a great deal of patience, and giving him time to recover his wits, she finally reduced him to intelligibility. When he told her he was the Emperor of Cathay, she became perfectly convinced that he was not right in the head; his very vague account of where he came from (all that he knew was that the house "looked like this," and that my name was Louis) confirmed her in this theory. But as he seemed to have no tendency to homicidal mania, and as he begged most piteously not to be turned out of the house and lost again, she concluded, after consultation with the aunt with whom she was living, that he had better stay where he was until his lawful proprietors could be found. So the only step, it being then the afternoon, that Esmée took, was the writing out of an advertisement (which subsequently

appeared in the morning papers), asking the friends or relations of "a Celestial gentleman calling himself the Emperor of Cathay" to call for news of him either at her aunt's house or at the — Theatre. An absolutely fatal document, if it had fallen into the hands of our enemies before the Emperor was in safety.

Here the narrative was in Esmée's hands, the Emperor having borne only a passive part in the subsequent proceedings ; he remained resignedly in Portman Square, while she went to her theatre at which she was acting. When the play was over, she joined her cousin Lady Hermione, and a party at supper, and thereat a lady mentioned my name, saying that she heard I was "back." At this, Lady Hermione, eager I suppose to display a fresh branch of her all-embracing knowledge, put in that I had returned full of cranks and crazes, and with mythical potentates in my train ; she gave a version of my interview at the Foreign Office, interlarded with the comments of Lord — and finished by saying it was very "odd." Esmée chimed in with the suggestion that there was an epidemic of supposititious Cathayan Emperors about, and retailed her own experiences. She was told to "depend upon it" that my impostor had got loose, and counselled to return him to me without loss of time. She returned home rejoicing, and acted on the suggestion at once. The key to the whole matter was now in my hands.

"Well, it's a simple way out of what might have been a very complicated situation," I remarked, with a sigh of great relief. "Here have I been ranting all over London all day, disturbing honourable households, frightening respectable bachelors, and molesting a police force which never did me any harm. I really must request your Majesty to promise me you will not incite Kwa-Yen to assault any more people."

"I will never be lost again, Louis," promised the Emperor readily, "it does not please me at all."

"It is an ill wind that blows nobody good, however," I added, turning to Esmée, "and I hope having found your way here once, by lucky chance, you will find it again on purpose."

She stood up, apparently thinking my words a dismissal. I was horrified, and cut short what she began to say with :

"Please don't go yet. The night is young and the revelry only beginning ; please stay a little longer."

"Oh, I mustn't outstay my welcome, or the poor cabman's patience," she said, laughing.

"The first is impossible," I said, "and I don't think the last matters in the least."

"Good-bye," she said, "and good-bye, your Majesty."

"Still inexorable?" I asked, as I went to open the door for her.

"Well, I will say *au revoir*," she said, looking up at me, her face in its golden frame gleaming very white against her black fur cloak.

"May I come and see you act?" I asked, blundering out the words as the chances of saying them at all diminished rapidly.

"It will be a pleasure to see you," she said frankly, "but why ask me?"

"Because," I said, as I showed her out of the house, "your commands will always be my law."

CHAPTER XIII

HIGH-CLASS COMEDY

"OH, Louis, I really do think she is an angel!" ejaculated Violet.

"In my country we think it is devils that have light hair," remarked the Emperor.

"That can't be true, because most English people have light hair, and I am *sure* English people are not devils," said Violet argumentatively.

"Perhaps it is not true," said the Emperor; "but a great many things are not true," he added, enigmatically.

"I think the conclusion has been reached before," I remarked from the back of the box; "does it decide Miss Sidney's capabilities?"

"The beautiful red lady is very true, I would *say*," replied the Emperor. "Why do you think not, Louis?"

"I?" I exclaimed; "I never made any such statement. Why does your Majesty think she is a devil?"

"But she is not, Louis."

"I know that perfectly well. But why does your Majesty say so?"

"She," the Emperor pointed unmistakably at Violet, "the honourable daughter of your brother, said the beautiful red lady was an angel, and an angel is the opposing thing of a devil. No?"

We were at the —— Theatre, watching Esmée Sidney

act. I do not know what the play was about, or who the rest of the company were ; I suppose I had my programme at the time, but, throughout the piece, I only saw one face, heard one voice, followed one lithe figure about the stage. If holding the audience by her personality be a sign of the first-rate actress, then Esmée Sidney's was the perfection of art.

It is now a good many years since I plunged into the whirlpool which is called being in love, and I certainly thought I had outgrown the practice, left it behind with my hopes and illusions, my ambitions and beliefs, in those halcyon days that seem invested with a golden halo as soon as they are past. Surely the sun shone every day of one's youth, and flowers bloomed all the year round ! Surely one's heart was always light when it was young ! Friends were always constant, and the loved one always perfect ; everything went right and nothing went wrong ! It is surely only in the dull and drear period of middle age that trouble and worry and disillusionment and dyspepsia make us their own ! But the question is, When does middle age begin ? I, at that current moment, was a young man still, in years.. I felt young, knew no diminution of strength, and was quite as heavy as ever before, if not more so. Yet I certainly had for some time been under the impression that I had left youth, its enthusiasms and self-deceptions, behind me, and with it the miraculous sun of yore, and the "wee little whimpering" god.

And lo ! in the midst of this chill and unbelieving middle age, the whole air hummed with Esmée, the whole world held only Esmée, the face of Esmée came and smiled across my dreams, and I knew that the best of life is not over for me yet.

And she loves Giles ! Well, in this world things go marvellous a-crooked, and the heart of the best of women

is mysterious and infinitely deceptive. To all outward seeming, the very last type of man likely to attract is that represented by Giles; even his own mother and sister are unable to think him a very fine specimen of manhood, and it seemed indeed one of Fate's heartless practical jokes that the One Woman of all others should have so little taste.

"And so you have met her, Louis?" remarked Violet. "Well, that's a good thing: because when she's your niece-in-law, you'll have to know her, won't you?"

"My dear Violet," I retorted savagely, "I do not suppose for a moment that I shall have any intercourse with Giles' wife, whoever she may be."

"Do you suppose she will go on being on the stage?" proceeded Violet placidly: "Just think how scandalised mamma will be if she does!"

"I should think it would be imperative," I returned, "a question of £ s. d.—no less."

"Why are you so cross to-night, Louis? Is it because the play bores you?"

"Not at all, not at all," I replied hastily, "I think it's a most amusing play."

"*Do you?* It's meant to be harrowing, you know."

"Of course, of course. But sad things always make me laugh. Who wrote it, I wonder? He ought to be Poet Laureate—I mean Playwright in Ordinary to the Queen."

"Do you really think it very good?" said Violet quite seriously, "I was thinking it wasn't up to much; the acting is of course excellent, but——"

"Oh, it would be nothing without the actors, of course."

"I think it a very foolish play," chimed in the Emperor, "I understand it not at all."

Violet set about explaining the plot to the Emperor,

who argued every point and asked questions which plainly perplexed my niece. He evidently preferred the style of drama to which he was accustomed. Meanwhile I, who could more nearly have approached the topic on his own ground, leant back in my chair and stared at the stage, where certainly there was nothing of play or performers, but Esmée only.

"Beg pardon, sir, a note for you."

For one moment, a ridiculous exaltation possessed me. Who but one could have sent me a note through one of the *employés* of the theatre? The envelope was plain, addressless, and I snatched it open; it contained a folded slip of paper inscribed in a crabbed peculiar hand. The two lines sprang to my eyes in a flash:

"Leave the theatre before the play is over. This is from one who knows *who* is with you."

I rose at once, dreams dispelled as if I had run my head into the brick wall of reality. Going out into the passage, I found the attendant who had brought me the note, standing with the aspect of a gentleman at leisure.

"Look here, my man," I said, "will you just go round and find out for me, if there are any Cathayans in the house besides the gentleman in my box?"

"Very good, sir,—thank you, sir," as I took steps to purchase his adherence.

While he was gone, I scribbled on one of my cards a hasty explanation to Esmée of how things stood; but what prompted me to this course of action, which seemed merely likely to upset her to no good purpose, I cannot say. When the fellow returned with the information that not a single Mongol was in the entire house, I doubled the card up in the envelope of the anonymous communication, and told him to deliver it to Miss Sidney.

"And there's another thing," I added. "When you've

done that, will you go down to the entrance and ask the first police constable you see to come this way? Give him my card and tell him I am an eminent magistrate in the Midlands."

Then I went back into the box.

"Now, my dear Violet," I began, "don't be frightened——"

"Oh, what has happened?" she cried, getting terrified at once without waiting for explanations, woman-like.

"Nothing has happened," I said; "something might be going to happen, but I am going to take steps to prevent it. I have had an anonymous note, giving me directions which I do not intend to follow; but I wish it to appear as if I had. So, Violet, will you stand up and look conspicuous in the front of the box while I help you on with your cloak, and will your Majesty take your hat and look as if you were going away at once? That is beautiful, and the effect from below I am sure is most deceptive."

"But, Louis, Louis!" cried Violet, in an agony, "what is the matter?"

"Sh-sh, not so loud!" I said. "Have you fastened your cloak? That's right, come to the very back of the box, and don't speak." I handed her the mysterious note and whispered explanations into the Emperor's ear. So five palpitating minutes passed as we sat in the depths of the box and waited for relief. Then a knock came at the door, and I opened it to see a stalwart policeman standing outside.

"Good evening, sergeant," I said ingratiatingly. "I have reason to believe that an attack of some sort may be made on me, or the gentleman with me, and I thought you might as well be at hand."

"That's all right, sir," he answered cheerfully (I never

saw a nicer man in my life), "it won't be no good their making no attack of no sort with me there. Let me see 'em trying it on, that's all."

"You reassure me very much," I returned.

Hereon my friend the theatre *employé* came up with another note—this time from Esmée herself (bless her!)—which ran to the effect that Mr. ——, the actor manager, whom she had made speed to consult, would be delighted to provide me with an alley of escape by means of the stage door, if I would wait till the play was over and then come "behind." A most excellent offer! which might include a view of Esmée, and therefore was by no means to be declined. We were already within measurable distance of the last curtain, and with the inspiriting remarks of my friend the policeman, and the confident assurance that I should shortly see Esmée to buoy me up, my pardonable excitement subsided. After all, you cannot spend the major portion of your life as a quiet country gentleman, and then look battle, murder, and sudden death in the face, at a moment's notice, with unmoved calm. I leave that to stoical Orientals.

Violet bore the suspense very well. After all, she was in comparatively little danger herself, unless our assailants proposed to throw bombs wholesale. The Emperor, who might have been excused for showing some agitation, was apparently going peaceably to sleep. Our purgatory lasted, I suppose, some fifteen minutes by the clock, when we heard the last reverberations of applause die away and the dull sound of feet as the house emptied itself. Then, watched out of sight by the policeman and guided by the attendant, we made our unobtrusive way to the door communicating with the stage, and in another revolution of the hour-glass I found myself face to face with Esmée. Violet, whose first expedition behind the scenes this was,

preoccupied with staring round her, never noticed our greeting; and indeed our colloquy was short. I asked Esmée to come to supper and she refused, but tempered the wind to the shorn lamb by telling me to call on her.

"It is a great pity the beautiful lady would not come with us," the Emperor woke up to say as we neared home. (His would-be murderers, if they existed at all, must have been at the door of the theatre, as they were never seen or heard of.)

"It is a great pity she is in love with Giles," I remarked.

"What do you mean, Louis?" asked the Emperor sleepily.

I need hardly say I did not enlighten him.

CHAPTER XIV

THE DEADLOCK

IT was plain to me that the position was absolutely untenable. The thousand and one opportunities which life in London offered to the enemies of the Emperor, were too many to be foreseen and guarded against by one man ; in the country I should not be holding such an extent of ground, and I resolved to beat a retreat. Meanwhile it was by no means a pleasure to me to leave London. To exile myself from Esmée—the place I held in her eyes might be only that of Giles's uncle, invested with the nameless unromantic horrors of a guardian ; yet if I could see her sometimes, it would atone for a great deal, and at any rate keep me in her mind. Ah, that is the great secret ! Never forget, ye lovers, that though absence may make the heart grow fonder when once it has unbarred the gate to the little god, oblivion drives him away when he is still only peeping through the bars. Don't let her out of your sight, lad, keep yourself before her mind, never let her find out that there are lots of good fish in the sea, and that one differs but very little from another in flavour.

Still, needs must when the devil drives, and in this case there was no doubt who held the ribbons. Wherefore I telegraphed to the respectable elderly lady who looks

after Blatchford for me, and followed my communication without unnecessary delay.

Blatchford is over a hundred miles from London, and I took the Emperor down in a special the second morning after our play. Trains were things he had heard of from Sung-Taou, and was therefore inclined to patronise, so he was perfectly fascinated by his new experience of railway travelling and expressed annoyance when it was over. He oscillated from window to window of our saloon car, and asked unanswerable questions about the country we passed through, with more animation than I had yet seen him display. He expressed the most cordial appreciation of our gracious Queen's intelligence when I told him that she had a private train of her own. Only he thought I ought to have had one too.

"When you go home, sire," I suggested as a remedy for this irreparable omission, "you will have railways all over your empire, and I can have a train there."

"So said Sung-Taou," he replied promptly, "iron carriages without horses running to the very ends of Mongolia," he added in a tone of reminiscence.

My house is three miles from the station, and stands in the middle of a park shaped like a sort of irregular pear. We arrived in time for luncheon, and before the short November afternoon closed in, I showed the Emperor over the place as far as might be. My abode is not what I myself should call pretty, being a specimen of the individual taste of my rich, lavish, and eccentric uncle, Baron Nathaniel Oppenheimer. This determined gentleman insisted during the sixties on building a house after his own ideas, ruthlessly overriding those of all known architects, and his ideas were more remarkable than picturesque. The chief feature in his dwelling-place was a huge hall, three stories high, which almost looked like

a cathedral, as it had a marble pavement, a double row of pillars, and arched windows in the roof, and was rich with gilding, while artists came miles to see its painted ceiling. Out of this eccentric and useless apartment he built two others of great size, which he designed for a saloon and a banqueting hall; they are suited to the style of the house, which can put up some thirty-four people at a pinch, and Uncle Nathaniel obviously intended to pass his days surrounded by this cumbersome house-party.

When one first enters the house, it strikes one as being quite unpretentious. The front door leads into a semi-circular hall, such as any country house might boast of; under a plain staircase, leading to an upper wilderness of bedrooms, an arched and decidedly dark doorway leads into a room we call the Long hall, which my uncle lined with the trophies of his not very extensive travels, trophies more strange than beautiful or valuable, chairs weird rather than comfortable, pictures, mostly daubs, of people in whom nobody could take the slightest interest, even if they knew their names, which in most cases were lost to the ages.

"Are these your ancestors, Louis?" asked the Emperor, staring from a "Portrait of a Lady" (said, undoubtedly without truth, to be by Titian) to a singularly bad copy of the Charles I. at Hampton Court.

"Not that I know of, sire, but it never does to be too certain about these things."

"Have you no pictures of your ancestors then?" he next asked, without much reference to what I said. His conversation generally tended this way.

"Giles has got what there are, I believe," I said.

"Do you not care to have them then?" he asked in a puzzled voice.

"No, sire, I can't say that I do. Which is lucky as they do not belong to me. You see my ancestors were few and evil, or, what is worse, uninteresting ; they didn't care for Art and didn't get themselves painted by good people. They didn't care for fame either, so they never did anything to make names in the world. They didn't care for anything which makes life worth living. They were a poor lot."

"I do not understand," said the Emperor. He didn't; he thought I ought to have revered the persons who were responsible for my existence, and it was contrary to all his ideas that I should speak of them as they undoubtedly were. So he spoke the truth, and closed the subject.

From the Long hall, a flight of steps leads up into the remarkable vestibule before mentioned, which we call the Marble hall, though marble enters comparatively little into its composition. This is as if my uncle wished to lead up to a climax. At the foot of the said steps, two doors lead respectively, the left to the servants' offices, which also communicate by a subterranean passage with the Marble hall and the big rooms spreading like wings at the end ; and the right to a winter garden, a small walled-in court and my own private rooms. These consisted of a bedroom, dressing-room, bathroom, and study ; and the corresponding suite on the floor above I dedicated to the use of his Celestial Majesty, with rooms for Wu-Chow and Kwa-Yen, so that he might have his servants within hail if he wanted them. The heights of the house were somewhat varied, as these two wings, mine and the servants', were only two stories high, as were the big rooms at the end ; the body of the house was three stories high and the Marble hall towered over all.

I have further to mention that out of the Long hall opened six fair-sized drawing-rooms, respectively called the

English, the French, the Spanish, the Arabic, the Dutch, and the Swiss rooms. They were each furnished rigorously *en suite* of their cognomens : the English was all Chippendale and Sheraton, with pictures, alas ! modern, all but one really good Sir Joshua, Kidderminster carpets, Worcester and Crown Derby china in cabinets ; the French was a Louis Quinze room, and the best furnished in the house ; the Spanish contained so-called Velasquezes and Murillos, Spanish embroideries and laces and trophies of Toledo swords ; the Arabic room was all divans and Cairene screens ; the Dutch, furnished like a farmhouse, but with Delft pottery and forgotten Flemish painters on the walls ; the Swiss, full of chamois heads and pictures of snowcapped mountains. A whim this, one among many, of my whimsical uncle's. He knew and thought he loved these countries, and fancied he should like their atmosphere round him even in the depth of English country life. It was a pity that he had not the taste and knowledge which, joined to his wealth, would have made these rooms storerooms of treasures. As it is, I leave them as he did, and they are curiosities to all the country round.

The house looks south-west. There is a garden on three sides, an ordinary English garden, large enough as far as that goes, but not especially beautiful, railed off from the park by high walls. In the front of the house there are five wide terraces, gravelled, garnished with urns and statues, each below the other to the level of a lake, and ten lawns; five on either side, correspond in tiers to the terraces. This is gaudy, I do not know that it is very beautiful. The park, as I think I have already explained, is pear-shaped. It contains stables, kitchen-gardens, a small colony of dependents' houses, woods enough to give a couple of days' shooting, a fairly good trout stream, a network of roads, fair stretches of grass,

some of them nearly half a mile in extent, and a goodly amount of things to kill. It is secured from the outside world by a high almost unscalable wall protected with iron spikes, and there are nine lodges. I mention all these things in order to make future references intelligible.

"What do you think of it, sire?" I asked the Emperor, after he had seen his new prison. For it could be little use to him; it was fortunate under the circumstances that he was used to a shut-in life.

"I shall be happy here," he said gravely.

"That's the chief thing," I remarked.

"I can read what I like here," he went on, "and you will tell me what I want to know. No one would do that at Cambaluc save Sung-Taou."

I began to get alarmed, as I was by no means certain if my supply of general information were equal to the demand; I could not boast the cosmopolitan talents of the lamented Sung-Taou, and my knowledge at best is but superficial.

However, I buckled to and did what I could, preparing, as I knew I should have to, for a somewhat strange life. We spent our days monotonously; Wu-Chow must have had the dullest life of all, as he refused to go out of doors or to join us at meals, and from being a talkative and bustling old personage, became sad and silent; he aged years in a week, and seemed to suffer from *mal de pays*. The Emperor, on the contrary, seemed perfectly, if placidly, contented and happy. He read half the day books which I ordered down for him from London, or dipped into those which he found in the house, though this he was chary of doing; he also struggled with the written language, and often brought me the most remarkable compositions (I have got them still in a locked drawer; they will be valuable some day). I tried to teach him to play cards, but this

I found to be impossible, though he took to billiards readily enough. Out of doors, I at first found him helpless, at sea, inclined to shiver and escape back to the fireside as soon as possible ; but gradually he cultivated a liking for following me about, listening to my conversations with the gardeners, grooms, and gamekeepers. To these personages, his Celestial Majesty was such a source of gaping wonderment that it took them weeks to get used to the sight of him ; he himself got far more quickly accustomed to their habit of not prostrating themselves, arguing, I suppose, that being foreign devils they could not be expected to know how to behave. He did not extend this forbearance to everybody. One day, in a passage, I met Kwa-Yen with a most noticeable black eye.

"Why, what has happened to you, Kwa-Yen ?" I asked in his own language and tones of compassion.

"It is nothing, great Excellency," he replied calmly ; "the Son of Heaven was graciously pleased to throw an inkstand at his servant, that is all."

That was all ! But it by no means embellished Kwa-Yen.

However, these exhibitions of violent temper were the exception, not the rule, with my Emperor, though they became more frequent as he grew used to his surroundings, and as the memory of his adventures before leaving Cambaluc, which had cowed and unnerved him, waxed dim with passing time. I took every precaution for his safety. I doubled the lodge-keepers, and made the most stringent rules about those who were to be let into the park ; I had a couple of night-watchmen always walking round the house, and detectives in plain clothes posted all over the place ; I had a telephone put up to connect me with Scotland Yard ; lined the outer edge of the park with mantraps, though its defences were already strong

enough to keep out any but the most determined malefactor; carried a loaded revolver with me night and day, and taught the Emperor himself to shoot, an art of which he had previously been ignorant. Unfortunately, he took to it with such relish that he shot everything he saw, including one of the gardeners, so I had to take all firearms from him.

All this time I lived on the memory of my last sight of Esmée and the hope of seeing her again." I sent her fairly regularly letters beginning "Dear Miss Sidney" and ending "Yours Sincerely"—wretched effusions—and she dispatched answers in the proportion of one to three; for, alas! she was an indifferent correspondent. The days when these answers arrived were the red-letter ones of that grey six weeks.

CHAPTER XV

A QUESTION OF THEOLOGY

FOR about a fortnight after our arrival in the country we were left to ourselves in perfect peace. The neighbours were all busy hunting and shooting ; they sent me their usual invitations to assist in shooting their coverts, which I punctilioiusly declined, and as it is happily not the custom to bother a bachelor with calls, they thereafter left me alone. The hunting question seemed likely to prove an awkward one. I hunt rarely myself, my only encouragement to this sport being that I do not destroy foxes ; but it would seem churlish if, contrary to custom, I refused to allow the local pack to draw my coverts. At the same time, I was utterly averse to opening my park to a quantity of miscellaneous people on pretext of following the chase ; it might be made an occasion for contravening all my orders and undermining all my precautions for the Emperor's safety. I staved off the burning question by writing to beg the local M.F.H. to wait till I had shot my coverts for the second time, which he politely consented to do ; I took care to name no date, and trusted to luck in the shape of a frost.

Thus for two weeks I saw no one of intermediate grade between the Emperor and the servants ; then Fiennes came down from London, and the very next day, as if the spell were broken, the Rector of Blatchford village

came to call on me. It was so near luncheon-time that I could not with decency have withheld an invitation thereunto, when Williams informed me that "the Rector and Mrs. Abercrombie" were in the Spanish room. I looked at Fiennes, who was making energetic preparations for turning the Swiss room into a temporary studio, and groaned.

"They have come to ask me why I have not been to church," I told him. "My unfortunate pedigree causes them to look upon me as concentrated essence of all Jews, Turks, infidels, and heretics, and a wandering sheep to be dragged into the fold neck and crop."

"I'll come with you," said Fiennes breezily; "I always get on with devil-dodgers first rate."

Though I doubted the truth of the statement I was glad of his upholding companionship. The rector was a lean, uncompromising individual, whose sole idea of conversation with strangers was a rigid system of cross-examination; the rectoress was doubtless to the full as severe a moralist, but she was always very polite to me. I believe she had marriageable daughters.

"You are just back from abroad, I hear?" began the rector, fixing me with a severe eye, as soon as I had effected an introduction of Fiennes and hurled out an invitation to luncheon, which was condescendingly accepted.

"I have arrived this very moment," I returned, in dread of the church question being opened. But my spiritual director was in search of higher game.

"I hope you enjoyed yourself," put in his better half with an amiable smile.

"You went very far afield, did you not?" resumed the rector.

"In fact, we were afraid of losing our squire altogether," added his wife ingratiatingly.

"No such luck," I returned. "I have no intention at present of making room for a more useful squire."

"Oh, Mr. Randolph, how can you say such things?" she exclaimed, in honeyed accents.

This was mere fencing. The rector brushed it aside, and pursued his subject.

"Is it true," he asked severely, "that you have a—a very remarkable guest?"

"The Emperor of Cathay is staying with me," I replied airily, as if it were quite an everyday statement, "if that is what you mean."

"Where is he?" demanded Mr. Abercrombie, glaring round as if defying the Celestial potentate to hide behind the furniture from his eagle eye.

"Sitting for his portrait in the Royal Academy," put in Fiennes.

"How very very interesting!" chimed in Mrs. Abercrombie, "and particularly interesting to us just now!"

She glanced at her husband.

"Why just now?" I put the question I was obviously intended to put.

"Oh!" answered the rector's wife, "because just now we have a missionary staying with us—such an interesting, earnest man—who has worked for years in Cathay. He has been telling us so much about his work and the life out there it has given us a great deal to think about! What strange, extraordinary lives those poor people lead! and he is a true apostle to them! Don't you think, Mr. Randolph," she went on, warming up to what she had evidently come to say, "that it would be very delightful if we could interest the Emperor in missions, so that when he goes back he could be of invaluable assistance to them?"

"We've got to get him back first," I remarked.

"Oh!" exclaimed Mrs. Abercrombie blankly, "is there any difficulty about that?"

"My dear lady," I interposed, "the intricacies of Oriental politics are such that I do not feel competent to meddle with them. Suppose we go and have some lunch; I have ordered it in the Dutch room to-day."

"I suppose the Emperor speaks Cathayan?" remarked the rector interrogatively; "a very difficult language, I believe?"

"Very," I replied, "not by any means to be mastered during luncheon-time. But, as a matter of fact, the Emperor speaks Tartar."

"Tartar, oh!" said the rector, as wrathfully as if he had been defrauded, "why is that?"

I left Fiennes to explain, from the resources of his own fertile imagination, and went in search of the Emperor. I found him looking out of the window of my sitting-room in a state of great distress because a rook was hopping about in the garden outside, and I had to soothe him by explaining that it was not a crow, and therefore could not possibly be a bird of evil omen. He was rather annoyed and perturbed, and on hearing of the Abercrombies, wanted to fly their presence and lunch on comfortable Celestial dishes concocted by Kwa-Yen. When I consented with alacrity, he changed his imperial mind at once.

"I want to see an English priest," he announced; and though I assured him he would be disappointed, he marched off to the Dutch room without more words.

Fiennes had been piling on the agony, impressing the Abercrombies with the historic value of the occasion, and orating of the wonders of Cathay and its Emperor, so that they doubtless expected something much more imposing than a narrow-chested little Celestial in a modern

European suit of blue serge to follow me into the room. That sovereign had managed to learn one lesson during these weeks—namely, that it was for imperial personages to begin the conversation—and he pulled himself together in face of the Abercrombies, asking after their “honourable health,” but in tones so low and stammering that they did not catch them and left me to guarantee that the thing inquired for was in a high state of preservation.

“Has he a wife?” asked Mrs. Abercrombie of me.

The Emperor’s ears were sharp, and after a quick glance at me, he answered hastily but quite audibly :

“Oh, a stupid person, not fit for you to know.”

“You mustn’t ask: it’s not etiquette,” I whispered strenuously to the lady, who was reduced to confusion.

“Oh, you speak English?” broke in Mr. Abercrombie sternly to the Emperor. “Mr. Randolph gave me to understand you spoke only Tartar, I think it was. *Of course* you are a Buddhist?”

The Emperor looked helplessly at me. Much against my will, I dashed into the breach.

“Really, Mr. Abercrombie,” I said, “I don’t think this is quite the time or the place for such a question, and you should understand that it is not the custom to ask such a one.”

“I do not agree with you, Mr. Randolph,” returned the rector with severity. “I cannot fall in with the lax modern notion that all times and all places are not suitable for the discussion of questions which lie nearest our hearts.”

“The question which lies nearest all our hearts at this moment is luncheon,” called out Fiennes, “and for God’s sake let us begin to discuss it at once. I for one have been ready for the last half-hour.”

I laughed, and the Abercrombies never forgave me.

"His Majesty, Joshua," I said, "saw a rook this morning and has made up his mind it will bring him bad luck."

"On the contrary, sire," cried Fiennes in his loud, hearty voice, "rooks are the luckiest of bipeds. When they go away, it is said the house falls down—no, I think I must be thinking of rats!—well, anyhow, rooks are meritorious fowls of the air, and their cawing is very jolly when you're used to them; all rural delights are very jolly when you're used to them—earwigs and thistles, and moated granges, and damp little churches, and—and so on. Don't you agree with me, Mrs. Abercrombie?"

"Really, Mr. Finns," she replied icily, "I have no experience of damp country churches. Ours is *most* well ventilated."

"What a pity!" said the unabashed Fiennes, "that knocks all the picturesqueness out of it at once."

"I should like the Emperor to see the parish church," said the rector authoritatively.

"Would it please your Majesty to go and see the priest's temple?" I asked with purposeful elaboration.

"No," replied the Emperor promptly, "temples do not please me; they make me feel tired."

Fiennes roared.

"There!" I said to the rector.

"It is a pity you should triumph over so deplorable a flippancy," said the rector, eyeing me sombrely; "it is not a sign of strength, I assure you, to make a mock at things which perhaps you do not understand. There is nothing admirable or even funny in irreverence."

"I entirely agree with you, Mr. Abercrombie," I answered, "and in order to help you to a more reverent frame of mind, let me remind you that his Majesty here is the High Priest of a religion which is older than yours by some two thousand years."

The rector was furious (I knew he would be); even his wife was up in arms.

"Really, Mr. Randolph," she exclaimed, "how you can say such things——"

"I say them because they are facts," I returned, "not because they make the slightest odds to me. You cannot suppose I care which first came into existence."

"I cannot remain and listen to you insulting your religion and the minister of it," said Mr. Abercrombie, rising in awful wrath.

"Hold hard, *padre*," said Fiennes familiarly; "no one wants to insult you or your religion either. Don't you see Randolph's only warning you off bothering his Majesty with it, who most likely knows a thundering sight more about religion and revelation and all these things than any of us?"

"I deny it!" snapped Mr. Abercrombie.

"How can you when you don't know? But I don't suppose his Majesty cares. Do you, sire?"

The Emperor was going on quite calmly with his luncheon, totally unaware that he had first been talked down to as an ignorant heathen, and then upheld by an unorthodox champion like myself. Mrs. Abercrombie rushed into the breach once more.

"I'm sure, Mr. Randolph," she began, "that if you were to talk to our missionary——"

The Emperor looked up.

"Missionary?" he echoed. "Those are foreign devils who come and teach the people false religions. When I go back to Cambalue I will have them all slain."

This finished the *rectory* party. They rose and cast off from their feet the dust of such a household of hardened heathens and heretics.

"It is very shocking, very dreadful," said the rector, with his gravest and most severe face.

His wife, not giving up all hope of my redemption, paused in the Long hall, as I was showing them out, and asked me if I had thought what a responsibility I was taking on myself.

"I have, my dear lady, indeed," I answered, quite seriously and in good faith. "I assure you no one can be more alive to the gravity of the position than I am. It is an exceedingly risky thing for one man to set himself up against an empire. But I don't see how I could have left the Emperor to his fate, and I think I can cope with the responsibility of keeping him safe now."

"Ah, Mr. Randolph, but I meant the spiritual responsibility!"

"Oh, as to that, I don't consider it any affair of mine," I said.

"Is not that equivalent to saying, Am I my brother's keeper?" she asked.

"Well, am I? I put it to you," I exclaimed. "I suppose you mean that you think I ought to preach at the Emperor, and try to convert him to Christianity; but I tell you flatly I have no intention of doing anything of the sort. I should never dream of meddling with any man's private beliefs."

"But wouldn't you allow the missionary——" she began.

"No, Mrs. Abercrombie, certainly not. I am sorry to be so peremptory, but I will allow no one inside the park gates unless I know all about them. That, you see, is my idea of the importance of my responsibility."

"But my husband," urged she, almost on the doorstep, "would you not let him speak to the Emperor?"

"Again no. I could not hear of such a thing. It would be in the worst taste."

"Taste?" exclaimed the rector, unable to keep silence

any longer. "Is that what you call disseminating the truth, Mr. Randolph?"

"We must first make up our minds what is truth," I answered, "and you will remember that even Christ himself was not able to answer that question when it was asked."

They drove their little pony carriage away in silent displeasure of the first magnitude, while I returned to my unfinished cigar.

"I have offended the Church for good and all, Joshua," I remarked, returning to lighter vein with great relief.

"Rum folks!" said Fiennes.

The Emperor finished his luncheon without the least perception of the storm that had raged over his head.

CHAPTER XVI

THE INTERLOPERS

"MAMMA says he's insignificant to look at," said Violet.

"That may be. But he's the ruler of one of the biggest empires in the world for all that."

"Well, you know, Louis, mamma's not at all so very certain about that. She heard all sorts of things before she left London."

"I shouldn't have thought there were enough people in London to make talk," I observed.

"Oh, Louis, there are always enough people to make talk. Giles heard things too, and after all, you know, it's been in all the papers."

"*What* has been in all the papers? and *what* things has Giles heard?" I exploded.

"Why, that the Emperor of Cathay is still at Cambaluc!" Violet brought out with a gasp.

"My dear, if you will listen to me for five minutes, I will explain to you all about that lie."

My Christmas party was in full swing; Tralee and Pilkington came down on the evening of the 20th; her ladyship and Violet, with Cuckoo and the Blessed Damozel and much paraphernalia, on the afternoon of the 21st; and this was the morning of the 22nd, when Violet, always my informant of that which goes on in the family in my absence, was giving me her mother's views of the Emperor,

whom she had seen for the first time the evening before. I had been talking to Violet in the Spanish room, and before I had finished my explanation of the plots and counter plots in the midst of which we lived and moved and had our being, we heard the gong going for luncheon. Violet walked slowly up the Long hall towards the Dutch room, looking rather wistfully about her.

"I would be a *dook* if I had your money, Louis," she remarked.

"No, you wouldn't," I returned hastily, "you'd be a discontented beggar like me."

"Have you seen Giles's tenants at Tranes yet?" she asked me at luncheon, when all the rest of the party were assembled. Tranes, the halls of Giles's and my own joint ancestors, is about three miles away.

"I have seen nobody and heard of nothing," I replied.

"How dull and tiresome of you to have no curiosity about anything!" said Violet; "I am told the girl is an heiress, and I am sure they are rare enough in these parts."

"Now-a-days, my dear, every gooseberry bush grows heiresses and millionaires. Paupers are quite refreshing by contrast."

"You can't get away from them at any rate," remarked Pilkington; "we have it on the best authority that they are always with us."

"They are always with me, for they are me," observed Tralee lucidly.

"Here's your chance, old man," I suggested, "marry the heiress."

"I might have a look at her," said Tralee unenthusiastically.

"What is she like?"

"None of us having seen her, ask elsewhere," I said; "but I don't think personally she can be up to much,

as she goes about with a detestable female called Lady Gethin."

"I don't think marrying for money can be much fun," profoundly observed Violet.

"My dear, no one ever marries for fun, it's a matter of business," I put in; but I was drowned by Tralee remarking with even more profundity than Violet herself: "But the people one can marry one doesn't want to, and the people one does want to, one can't."

"They manage these things better in his Majesty's country," suddenly roared Fiennes.

Tralee turned to the Emperor.

"How many wives can you have in Cathay, sire?" he demanded.

"It depends on how many you can keep," returned the Emperor, quite seriously.

"That's sound," said Tralee after reflection; "but I can't keep any," he added in tones of despair.

"Then the poor wives don't get a look in? They have to put up with only one husband or a fraction of one; that doesn't seem to me fair," said Violet.

"Really, Violet," remarked her mother severely, "I do not think this subject requires discussion. Please be so kind as to change it."

"They are not white women, you know," said the Emperor, breaking in on the sudden pause which followed her ladyship's rebuke. What train of thought led his Majesty to make this reassuring statement we never discovered, but the result roused all Lady Frances's ire.

"I should hope *not!*" she exclaimed, glaring at the unconscious Emperor, and began to talk pointedly to Pilkington.

"It is a terrible pity, my dear Louis," she said, later, coming into the Arabic room, where I was smoking, "that you are so terribly eccentric."

Surprised by this sudden attack, I could at first find no answer but a wild stare.

"If you were like other people," she proceeded scathingly, "you would have asked some young men down for Violet, instead of such perfectly impossible people."

I rose, bristling.

"In what particular do my friends strike you as impossible?" I inquired stiffly.

"Oh, my dear Louis, you know perfectly well what I mean!"

"I know perfectly well," I retorted, "and you know perfectly well too, that Pilkington and Tralee always spend Christmas with me, and if you find them 'impossible,' I am surprised you should come to meet them."

"Doctor Pilkington and Lord Tralee are all very well," she returned in tones of would-be conciliation.

"Then you mean Fiennes?" I cut her short. "I am perfectly aware that Fiennes is a Bohemian, and perhaps he is slightly noisy. But I am a Bohemian myself by predilection, and I am sure, after constant association with your set, you must be inured to noise."

"I don't at all object to Mr. Fiennes," she asseverated; "of course I know he is an artist, and they are always peculiar, and one must make allowances for them. But I ask you, Louis, was it quite necessary to ask this Cathayan man to meet us?"

"What, the Emperor?" I exclaimed. "But what on earth did you expect me to do with him?"

"I think, really, by now, you might let him go back to his own people."

"My dear Frances, what are you talking about? How can I possibly send him back to Cathay to be murdered?"

"Why should he be murdered? He must have got some friends somewhere."

THE INTERLOPERS

"None that I know of, and he has neither money, ~~nor~~ prospects, nor resources. Does he look like a man who can take care of himself? and is it not obvious to the smallest intelligence that I, who picked him up, am responsible for him?"

"Then you mean to keep him for ever?"

"I mean to keep him safe until the popular party is again in the ascendant in Cathay."

"And after that, Louis," she said in her suavest manner, "you are surprised when I say you are eccentric."

"Well, when I come to think of it, perhaps it is not very usual to adopt an Emperor."

"Louis," her tone was icy, "*is* it necessary to keep up this farce when you are talking to me?"

"What do you mean?" I exploded.

"Talking as if he really was the Emperor of Cathay."

"Talking—as if— Let me tell you, Frances," I exclaimed, facing her with fury, "that I, who have seen the Emperor face to face in years gone by, will stake my soul that I am right. I would also have you to know that so long as the Emperor is under my roof, you, in common with the rest of my guests and household, will be kind enough to remember that, with the exception of the Queen and the Czar, he is the greatest sovereign in the world, and you will treat him as such. Also my rules and regulations for his safety will be most strictly and stringently observed, and whoever infringes them in the slightest particular leaves the house. You know what they are, and you know me too, and whether I say things without carrying them into effect."

Boiling with irritation, I walked away to the window, commanding a view of the front drive, at which I stared angrily. The same moment, Fiennes' Bull of Basan laugh was heard, and he suddenly appeared out of the front

door waving a bicycle. Violet and Tralee were already emulating a circus on their machines on the gravel drive, while Pilkington and the Emperor watched them from the steps. I noticed that the Emperor had wakened up surprisingly, the presence of these noisy people seeming to have a stimulating rather than a terrifying effect on him. Even as I looked, I heard Fiennes' roaring voice calling out to the Emperor that he "really ought" to learn bicycling, and Chin-Wang, the nervous and unenterprising, replying like a child: "Show me." In another moment, Fiennes and Tralee had taken him at his word, and were supporting him in a slow, dangerous, and shaky progress on the gravel. Then the humorous side of the thing struck me. I thought of all those millions of silken-tongued, soft-robed, dignified yellow men in the far East, and their feelings if they could see their Son of Heaven, that sacred potentate whom none must look in the eyes, that head of their ancient and most reverend religion, grappling feebly with the ungraceful art of bicycling in front of a common and profane English country house, watched by women and medicine men, upheld by loud-voiced, ribald persons without ancestors and without official dignity. The contrast between the theoretical Orient and actual Occident struck me as too funny; I forgot my very genuine annoyance with my sister-in-law, and shouted with laughing.

Now the cyclists and their imperial pupil were scattered as chaff before the winds of heaven by my phaeton, and I, suddenly remembering an important engagement, dashed out into the hall in search of a hat. Punctual to the minute, Cuckoo and the Blessed Damozel, sunny little much-wrapped-up figures, stood on the steps, Cuckoo shouting for pure *joie de vivre*, his sister, all eager interest and "squeaky comment as usual. As Williams, with as

much care as if they were rare pieces of *bric-à-brac*, lifted the children on to the box-seat, the Emperor returned to the steps, as a nervous bather to shore, and stood silent, looking at me putting on driving-gloves, with a question in his eyes.

“So you mean to learn bicycling, sire?” I remarked conversationally. He answered by another question, put pathetically.

“Louis, can I ever learn all that these people seem to know?”

“God bless you, yes!” I ejaculated. “The meanest intelligence could acquire all Tralee’s knowledge, for instance, in about three weeks.”

“You think I can?” queried the Emperor, taking my half-understood words as an oracle as usual; “then I will begin. How,” he added, with the glimmer of shrewdness he occasionally displayed, “can I understand what they say, if I do not know their language?”

“Uncle Louis,” cut in the Blessed Damozel earnestly, “please drive into Aunt Violet and knock her over.”

Declining with firmness to gratify this amiable desire, I drove out from under the portico, and, turning the horses round on the wide expanse of gravel beyond, left the house on our right. On one hand, as we drove, was the garden, on the other, the first of the five lawns corresponding to the terraces on to the lake. This abrupt sinking in the landscape is neutralised by the ascent of the wood over against us on the other side of the lake, which wood attains greater heights than the eminence the house stands on. This secures privacy, but spoils the view. The gravelled road sloped gently down all through the grass park beyond the garden, even until we passed one of the nine lodges and got out into the open country.

"Why did they stop us so long at the gate, Uncle Louis?" the Blessed Damozel wanted to know.

"Because it is my orders, my dear," I returned succinctly.

"Why, Uncle Louis?"

"For fear, O inquiring Damozel, of suspicious characters getting promiscuously into the park."

"Are those fieths, Uncle Louis?" asked the Blessed Damozel, who always transposes this word in a manner peculiar to herself; "listen, Cuckoo," she added, "what would Uncle Louis do if a fieth came into the park?"

"Take a big gun and shoot him down dead," returned the bloodthirsty Cuckoo, with conviction. "Fiefs is hollid wicked mens," he added virtuously, "and Uncle Louis is *good* mens," seizing my arm in a sycophantic grasp slightly disturbing to the horses, who, feeling a check on their mouths, swerved across the road.

"Your approval is very soothing to my feelings, Cuckoo," I remarked, "but if it leads to upsetting the carriage, I shall be forced to discountenance the expression thereof."

"Uncle Louis," said the Blessed Damozel, in admiring tones, "you use beautiful long words, just like the clergyman on Sunday."

"It is the first time in my life I have been likened to so reverend a character," I remarked; "and talk of Mephistopheles and kindred spirits, there *is* the rector."

We were now in an outlying hamlet of Blatchford village, a suburb included in the cure of Mr. Abercrombie, and its spiritual director at that precise moment of the world's history turned out of a lane on the right and advanced upon us. He looked the very impersonation of rigid High Church decorum from the soul of his "jemimas" to the severe orthodoxy of his "jampot"; on his head was a rather bad tall hat, to which, in spite of its inferiority, he was so much attached that he even at times insisted

on wearing it simultaneously with a cassock, regardless of the distinct aspect of Noah in the Ark thereby imparted to his sacerdotal person. On this occasion, he was merely adorned by an ordinary clerical coat, and the chaste severity of his angular Anglican style was a contrast to the appearance of his companion.

"This is Mr. Jenkins, the missionary from Cathay," said our rector, on bringing us up at a standstill by an authoritative wave of the hand. I supposed and secretly hoped I was sent to Coventry for my unspeakable behaviour some weeks before, but no such good fortune attended me. "Mr. Jenkins, our squire, Mr. Randolph."

The missionary ducked his head with an unctuous smile.

"So pleased to meet you, Mr. Randolph," he murmured sibilily. "Dear little ones, how d'e do? Yours, I suppose, Mr. Randolph? So like you indeed."

"As you have been so much in Cathay, Mr. Jenkins," I remarked, after affably disclaiming all responsibility for the existence of Cuckoo and the Blessed Damozel, "I suppose you speak Cathayan fluently."

And with a disarming smile, I repeated my remark in that Oriental tongue. He was obviously nonplussed, but recovered himself with miraculous rapidity.

"Ah, Cathay is a very large place," he replied with a treasy smile, "and you must know that there are so many different dialects. A Cambaluc man, you know, cannot understand what one from Chink-a-lan says; no doubt you and I have been in very different provinces."

"How true!" I remarked, concealing my disgust at his quickness; "and have you been most in the eastern or the western provinces?"

"Well, I have travelled widely," he replied, evading again, "but of course I did not learn the dialects of all the provinces I passed through." As he looked up, the

distinct squint in his little piggy eyes suddenly gave a furtive and sinister aspect to his face. He probably knew already what parts of the Celestial Empire had been honoured by my presence, or if not, he obviously would not allow himself to be caught out; so being always an inferior detective, I abandoned the subject.

"I hope," cut in the rector in his severest tone, "that you will change your mind, and allow Mr. Jenkins to see the—ahem!—your august visitor."

"I am very sorry, Mr. Abercrombie," I returned politely, "but I really cannot make my august visitor a sort of beast in the Zoo to be shown off. I should think, too, that Mr. Jenkins sees so many Celestials in the ordinary course of business that he will not care to see another. Good day."

And I whipped up and drove off hastily before the rector could utter more remonstrances. A truly awful thing is a fanaticism which carries one to these lengths; if one does not stop at harbouring and patronising highly suspicious characters and endeavouring to foist them on to one's innocent country neighbours, where will one stop?"

"Uncle Louis," here interposed the Blessed Damozel, "is your 'gust visitor the Majesty-Emperor?"

"Guessed right as usual, fair niece," I answered.

"And does that little man want to see him? Ugh!" proceeded the discerning Miss Clifford, with an exaggerated shiver of disgust, "I shouldn't think the Majesty-Emperor would want to see *him*, horrid nasty little *fat* man!"

"Damozel," I said gravely, "you have already developed the first and best characteristic of your sex. Cultivate it, my dear, cultivate it! A woman's instinct is far above all mere reason."

Our encounters were not over for the afternoon. Soon after leaving the hamlet where we had met the rector

and his *protégé*, we turned to our left down a lonely country road, hemmed in by dreary-looking grass fields full of evidently *blasé* cows. The Blessed Damozel enlivened this monotonous route by highly dramatic statements concerning the way she should jump the hedges between the fields, if she were on a horse. Cuckoo, who had no such equestrian ambition as his sister, and in fact was rather afraid than otherwise of the mild Shetland pony I gave him last birthday, listened apathetically to these thrilling narratives, while I more politely endeavoured to show becoming interest. We were brought up short in the conversation by the advance of a victoria, from which a lady signalled to us to stop; on arriving alongside, I saw that it was Lady Gethin, Giles's tenant, which was not a surprising *rencontre*, as we were on the road to Tranes.

"Mr. Randolph! Mr. Randolph! we haven't seen anything of you for ages. May I introduce you to Miss Ruggles?"

Lady Gethin is always very gushing to me, and speaks of me, I am told, as "that dear young man." I look upon this as unjustifiable, she being only a woman of some fifty years, very well preserved in appearance and juvenile in manners. I believe there is a "Sir" Gethin somewhere, probably in India, but as he has not shown his face for many years, he is universally disbelieved in, even by Lady Gethin herself. Miss Ruggles was the heiress I wished Tralee to have an opportunity of inspecting, and she was a young woman of the hopelessly insignificant appearance that so often runs hand in hand with the possession of untold gold. She remarked: "Ow! how do you do?" and relapsed into silence.

"Your sweet little nephew and niece, I see," gushed Lady Gethin. "Is dear Lady Frances staying with you? I simply must drive over and call one day soon."

"Oh—er—she's in mourning and not seeing anybody now," I remarked hastily, stretching a point, for poor George Clifford died in the early spring.

"Oh, but I am such an old friend, I really do not count as a visitor," exclaimed Lady Gethin. "I assure you, I really must, I must indeed."

"My sister-in-law's time is very much taken up in—in visiting the poor," I went on; "she is hardly ever at home—upon my honour I scarcely set eyes on her."

"Really, Mr. Randolph!" cried Lady Gethin kittenishly, "I shall begin to think you are trying to prevent me from coming to your delightful house."

This was exactly what I was trying to do, but I promptly endeavoured to conceal the manoeuvre.

"I should indeed prefer you to come when I have no visitors and can entertain you properly," I remarked, with a killing smile. "May I hope—later? Ah, that will be very nice!"

Lady Gethin smiled and laughed and shook her finger, bubbling out: "So delightful!" a remark she fires off constantly without much application to the subject in hand, and I pretended the incident was closed and took leave.

"Damozel," I said, as soon as we were out of earshot, "on no account are you to grow up like that horrid pushing woman."

"No, Uncle Louis. Is she very fashionable, like the ladies you read of in books?"

"No, I should think not," I answered, though slightly nonplussed by the question, "I should be sorry for the people who took their fashions from her, at any rate."

"I don't think we have met very nice people out driving," remarked the Blessed Damozel, in the tone of a severe critic.

"You are quite right, my dear," I said, "but then I am afraid nice people, like you and me, for instance, are at a premium."

"What does that mean?" asked two puzzled voices.

"It means," I replied, struggling after lucidity, "that they don't grow on every gooseberry bush."

The Blessed Damozel threw her head back and pealed with shrill laughter, in which Cuckoo's still higher note joined.

"You are a funny Uncle Louis," remarked my great-niece.

So in the department of a humorist I was not a failure, whatever I might be elsewhere.

CHAPTER XVII

IXION UP TO DATE

It all happened when I was out. Otherwise, of course, it would never have happened at all. It was an object-lesson to me of a fact I should have known before, namely, that if you don't look after your own concerns yourself, nobody else will think them important enough to look after them in your absence. Naturally, as I was only there quite at the end, I can describe what occurred from hearsay alone, but as it bores me to go on reiterating "Violet told me," or "the Emperor said," I shall abstain from doing so, and shall give a plain and straightforward statement of facts.

I had gone to dispense justice in the small county town of Stamborough, six miles distant; Tralee and Fiennes were shooting in the park, and I do not know what had become of Pilkington. At this crisis, with no one left in the house but her mother and the Emperor, it of course occurred to that tiresome Violet to want something. I do not know what the something was, but it was quite trivial, a postal order, stamps, or a reel of cotton—an article, at any rate, of which there was none on the premises. In order to become possessed of this rubbish, which at the moment appeared to Violet the sole thing the world had to offer, it was necessary to go into the village to the

village shop, and Lady Frances firmly declined to escort Violet thus far, on the score of a headache or some such frivolous pretext. Violet, never allowed out alone, but unaccustomed to being thwarted, fumed and fretted and stamped her feet for some minutes, till a brilliant idea struck her.

"If I take the Cathayan man with me, it will be all right, won't it?" she asked; and Lady Frances, moved by an evil spirit which longed to frustrate my strict orders, said it would.

So Violet, restored to good humour, asked the Emperor to bicycle through the park. In these few days, Chin-Wang had become complete master of the machine, and insisted on my ordering him down from London a specimen thereof, painted yellow and generally noticeable and gorgeous. He thoroughly enjoyed displaying his prowess, and consented to Violet's suggestion without hesitation. Next scene in the comedy, they were spinning cheerfully through the park, exchanging opinions on cycling in general and their own machines in particular.

Now there was certainly no reason on earth why Violet and the Emperor should not have bicycled as far and wide among the winding well-kept park roads as they chose; but when Violet, skimming down on the north-west lodge, whirred her bicycle bell loudly for the purpose of summoning the lodge-keeper, then the music began to strike up.

Through the gate they pedalled and down the short lanes which led to the village; down the vague, crooked street and past (mark this) the rectory; through a crowd of shouting children running out of the National School, and up to the miscellaneous village shop. An expeditious purchase, a swift return, and no harm would have been done; but country methods are slow, and the female who

dispensed string and unwholesome lollipops, as well as various other commodities the usefulness of which a sage would be at a loss to specify, was aged and none too intelligent. In selecting from among her miscellaneous stores the article desired by Violet, she took, like Charles II. in dying, an unconscionable time, and what mischief was wrought during that period transpired later.

The difficulties of consummating her purchase surmounted, Violet took leave of the ancient shopkeeper, and rode off gaily; her utmost anticipation extending to the lunch which would be awaiting her at home. The road led, as I think I said before, down the devious village street, and then on, still out of the straight, to a place where four roads crossed. As Violet and the Emperor rode down this lane, uncertain as it was in direction, their route home was by the cross road turning sharp to the right. The hedges were high thorn ones which blocked out all the view; a deep ditch full of leaves and brambles and bottomed with a little water and more mud, conscientiously followed the windings of the road on either side, and a very narrow strip of grass intervened between ditch and roadway, which latter was heavy with mud. Violet, always leading the Emperor, skinned to the right with the airiness of a swallow, and put on extra speed on the straight run to the park gate. About a hundred yards down the road, her tire exploded with a loud report. The Emperor started so violently that he promptly fell off; Violet herself sprang down and examined the locality of the mischief.

"Oh dear! oh dear! and I don't understand blowing up the horrid things again at all!" exclaimed Violet, who could take care of herself as long as everything went smoothly, but was generally helpless in an emergency.

The Emperor wheeled his bicycle up abreast of hers, and stood looking at it calmly.

"I am too deficient to touch your honourable machine," he remarked.

Violet looked despairingly up and down the road, but in vain; there was no sign of horse, cart, or pedestrian. Towards the lodge the road sloped gently downwards for about a quarter of a mile; in the opposite direction, bare as the back of a hand and fringed by unfriendly hedges, it lost itself in the haze of distance. The prospect down the two cross roads was hidden from view, but Violet was just suggesting to the Emperor that he should go back to the turn and look for possible advancing help, when the aggressive note of a bicycle bell broke in upon the dilemma, and a portly form on a somewhat battered machine rounded the corner from the direction of the village.

"Can I be of any assistance to you?" puffed out the missionary, wheeling up to the scene of the disaster.

The apparition was not a particularly pleasant one, but Violet, at sea herself and fully recognising the uselessness of the Emperor, welcomed it as if it were a messenger from on high: she began to pour out voluble explanations, and the missionary stooped down over her injured wheel with an expression of concern. Then with a sudden movement of which his considerable bulk seemed incapable, he snatched a murderous-looking knife from its sheath on his hip, and wheeled round upon the Emperor. Violet caught the glint of steel, and saw the Emperor fall like a log, and sent the wildest scream ringing through those quiet country lanes that ever startled the birds from the hedgerows. Then arose a blatant uproar of hoofs quickening into a gallop, and round the opposite corner from the village shot a lady on a chestnut horse into the thick

of the fray. The knife flashed high in air for the *coup de grâce*, and next moment flew wide, to sheathe itself in a quivering tussock of grass, as a loaded cutting-whip, whirling round the rescuer's head, descended on the wrist of the missionary with a sound like the whistling of a tempest. Instantly the baulked assailant, yelling an oath of pain and rage, flew at this new party to the affray ; but she, now on her feet in the road, drawn up at her horse's shoulder like an avenging angel, caught him by the wrist and flung him from her with the most approved twist as practised on the melodramatic stage, so that, stumbling backward, he tripped over a stone-heap and collapsed incontinently, heels and head much mixed and confused together, into the moist and thorny ditch.

Then it was that I came on the tumultuous scene, driving round the corner from the village in my dogcart, lulled in a false security. The tableau that leapt to my unexpecting eyes brought me off the high box like a shell out of a gun. There I saw Violet, who had sat down on a stone-heap in her agitation, with her bicycle leaning against her as a sort of armour against invaders, grasping her handle-bar in one hand, and her hat, which had blown off to add to the confusion, under her arm, while she groped blindly and abstractedly for falling hairpins. There I saw the Emperor prone in the road like a star-fish out of water, his mouth open and his eyes turned up with a frozen terror. And, best of all, I saw Esmée Sidney herself, sprung from God knew where, an armed Amazon charging stormily out of space at the psychological moment. A "jemima" boot protruding out of the nearest ditch betrayed the missionary.

Violet and I both began to talk at once in the piercing key peculiar to the Randolphs, and during the tornado of our explanations and ejaculations the murderous

missionary managed to disentangle himself from thorns and mud. While we still exclaimed and gesticulated, he crept to the side of the road and seized his boneshaker. A shout from my groom was the first warning we had to recall us from our excitement, only to see the flying form of the rector's charming guest disappear round the corner. Let me add that he was never heard of again, to my great chagrin, and the rector and Mrs. Abercrombie to this day are chary of uttering the word missionary in my hearing.

Meanwhile Esmée's one idea was to pursue him, in which quest she insisted on whirling off the scene almost as suddenly as she had whirled on. I was divided between my desire to follow her, my incompetency as a cyclist and the urgent necessity of getting the Emperor home at once. The hedges might be swarming with Cathayan spies, and every lost moment heavy with danger. I put the Emperor into the cart and walked home with Violet, relieving my mind by giving her a piece thereof.

"Let this be a warning to you, Violet," I said in the time-honoured words of our infancy.

"Oh, Louis, I shall never want to bicycle again; I never was so frightened in my life!" cried Violet, in tears. "I really think you ought to speak to Mr. Abercrombie; I don't think he has any right to have loose lunatics about."

"I suspect something more than lunacy in this affair," I said.

"Oh what, Louis?"

"Premeditated murder," I replied sombrely.

"Oh, impossible! Who would want to murder——"

"The Emperor of Cathay? A great many people, my dear Violet—make no error."

Violet, much shaken, only responded by tears.

When the road was examined later, a strand of barbed wire was found stretched across it just where Violet's tire burst; there were not a few comments on the singularity of this circumstance, and conjectures as to its cause.

CHAPTER XVIII

A QUESTION OF ENJOYMENT

"OH, Louis, what fun it would be to give a ball here!" exclaimed Violet. Her remorse and alarm were short-lived, and even if she herself had been disposed to cherish them, they were swiftly driven out of her head by her mother. Lady Frances was very angry about the whole affair, as justifying me, and she therefore took a high and mighty line of pooh-poohing its significance, and hastened to turn Violet's thoughts to other and gayer channels. The materials were ready to hand, for it was the hunt ball season.

"Your ideas of fun always astonish me, Violet," I remarked mildly. "My private opinion is that the entertainment in question would be an unmitigated nuisance."

"What do you think, Lord Tralee?" asked Violet, appealing to her other neighbour at the luncheon-table.

"Well, to tell the truth, I agree with Randolph," he remarked, after a mental struggle with his conscience which showed plainly on his countenance.

"That is the way with all the young men of the present day," observed Lady Frances, in a tone as if she were a survival of some prehistoric age; "nothing will induce them to go to balls. If you want seventy, you must ask seven hundred, and you may get seventeen. I have heard that so often."

"So have I. It is not in the least original," I remarked to the pot of chrysanthemums just in front of my plate; aloud I quickly added: "Take care, Tralee! To be *blasé* is always a sign of excess of youth, or else of insufficiency of intellect."

"But a ball in the house, Lord Tralee," urged Violet; "that's surely different?"

"Of course it's different," assented Tralee; "it's worse."

"I should so like," said Violet pathetically, "to say I had danced with the Emperor of Cathay!"

"Well, you will have no opportunity of saying anything of the kind, even if the Emperor could dance, which he can't. It's not that I want to spoil your pleasure, Violet," I added hastily. I could not bear to see that look of disappointment on her pretty face. "It's only that the risk is one I should be mad to think of incurring."

"My dear Louis, how very absurd!" said my sister-in-law, in tones of icy stateliness from the head of the table; "let the child have her ball. What harm can it possibly do you to put yourself out for once?"

"I would put myself out a thousand times," I answered, "only I cannot put a mixed multitude of unaccountable people *in*; I am very sorry, Violet, but it cannot be done."

"I had no idea you could be so selfish, Louis," said my sister-in-law, in cold censure.

"If taking reasonable precautions for the Emperor's safety is selfish," I retorted, "then I certainly am infernally selfish."

"Reasonable? My dear Louis, can you give any reason for the extraordinary things you do?"

"I can give no end of excellent reasons for the extra

ordinary thing I am doing now," I said, beginning to get irascible as usual. I endeavoured, however, to preserve a certain outer calm, lest Pilkington, Tralee, and Fiennes should be spectators of one of the family battles royal.

"I should like to hear them," said Lady Frances, keeping up her cold sleetiness of demeanour, "for I am perfectly unable to guess even at their existence."

"What, after what has happened?" I exclaimed.

"My dear Louis, I imagine you will not include the inmates of the nearest asylum among your guests. We all know they may get loose on country roads"—this she uttered with much emphasis and intention, challenging me with her eyes through the interstices of the chrysanthemums—"but they are not commonly invited to balls."

"My dear Violet," I said, turning in despair to my niece, "why on earth can't you be satisfied with the hunt ball, instead of insisting on having one here?"

"But you said nothing would induce you to go to the hunt ball," she returned, looking dubiously from the starched countenance of her mother to my ruffled one.

"I will reconsider my verdict," I said, "in view of your insatiable longing after this wearisome form of exercise. And if there is any youthful creature of my sex who shares your views and can be induced to come here, send him a summons on the useful and unobtrusive telegraph wire."

"You're an angel," said Violet, "in a wonderfully complete disguise, though," she added.

"It is rather late to get up a party," chimed in the frigid voice of her mother.

"Nothing like as late as to send out invitations for a ball," I asserted. "Come, Violet, reel off your pet partners."

"The Toms have been thrown over for next week by the Hampshires, who are in mourning," said Lady Frances.

"Oh, mother, don't let's have the Toms," cried Violet. Tom Clifford was poor George's twin brother. "I can't bear her, horrid stuck-up woman!"

"She is very smart," said Lady Frances reprovingly.

"She comes down to breakfast in a hat and veil," said Violet.

"Well?" said I.

"Well, you ignorant man, would she do it if she wasn't so painted she wouldn't be fit to be seen otherwise?"

"Come, don't abuse Mrs. Tom," I said peacefully, "she was the love of my life."

"Oh—h!" ejaculated Violet, "sure you're not mixing her up with Lady Hermione Sidney?"

"Certainly ask Lady Hermione Sidney," broke in my sister-in-law in an animated manner; "she is very smart too."

"Then she probably won't come," I suggested unmoved.

"What nonsense, Louis! just as if any one wouldn't come to a house like this! If you would only listen to me, you would have it always full of the smartest people."

"Well, as I perfectly loathe the fatuous persons who call themselves the smart set, perhaps it is as well that I always adopt the *rôle* of the deaf adder," I remarked.

I heard my sister-in-law murmuring, "Perfectly extraordinary!" in a crushing tone, and quickly changed the conversation to cigars. Lady Frances hates the smell of a cigar and avoided it with great haste.

The ball took place on the 7th of January at the small town that is our local hunting capital. Having definitely

decided to honour the entertainment, I determined not to howl over spilt milk, but to go through the ordeal as cheerfully as might be ; I was assisted in this noble resolve by the spectacle of Violet's whole-hearted enjoyment. Violet is a society girl to the tips of her fingers, and as such does not shine at the covert-side, on the moor, or by the salmon river ; she wields a fan with much more success than a rod, and vastly better becomes a tulle ball gown than a riding habit. She succeeded in routing out from somewhere a posse of young men, whom I was given to understand were her favourite partners, and *partis* approved by her watchful mother. They were no doubt meritorious youths, but though they spent two nights in my house, I never properly made out which was which ; they all seemed to be called "Algy" or "Monty," and to be well posted up in the latest scandal ; they were perfectly willing to revel at my expense and did not worry me with their conversation, so I suppose they filled their places in the scheme of the universe adequately enough for all practical purposes.

The arrival of these dancing pegs and of the Tom Cliffords and Lady Hermione was the signal of retreat for the Emperor ; he declined to face an avalanche of strangers and caught a convenient cold straightway. I overheard Lady Frances telling Mrs. Tom what a blessing it was "the dreadful yellow man" was not on view, as "poor dear Louis" had a "painful habit of expecting one to stand up when the creature came into the room ; such a nuisance, my dear !" Mrs. Tom and the Algies and Monties were, however, much disappointed by the coyness of the Celestial potentate, and complained of it bitterly and in vain.

In the end I was well repaid for my goodness and endurance, for on arriving at the Town Hall, transmogrified

by parti-coloured drapings and hunting trophies, vaguely interspersed with mirrors, into a hall of rejoicing, to the strains of some band obviously not local, the first sight which gladdened my eyes was that of Esmée Sidney floating by in a valse. The cold drive in a 'bus illuminated by one oil-lamp which stunk horribly and then went out, and the certainty of being poisoned by whatever alcohol the Hunt Committee thought proper to provide for my refreshment, faded from my mind ; I lurched up against a rather unsafe pillar, and peacefully watched the dancers.

Now there is nothing more instructive than to watch other people dance. Afar off, when no music can be heard, and strange shapeless shadows only can be seen passing to and fro, mostly backwards, on a blind, it is a mirth-provoking spectacle ; in the full blare of instruments, a shiny floor spreading up to one's feet like a sea of glass, a Turkey twill pillar in the small of one's back, it affords much food for reflection. Right in the middle of the room was Violet—here now was a vision of the poetry of motion, if only her partner would not hold her as in a wooden vice, and make the while frantic attempts to run round and round her. Nearer came a man valsing as if his limbs belonged to him and he knew it, hampered by a partner whose demeanour was that of the Dutch doll. They all passed me—Lady Hermione, sparkling in sheeny black sequins, winding in and out of the other couples like a beautiful human snake ; Tralee, whose methods I can only describe as of the locomotive order, fraught with utter disaster to any who came in contact with his vast person ; Tom Clifford, dancing as if he were assiduously handing out refreshments. Then as the music ceased, the human sea surged up towards me in my doorway ; ancient fox-hunting squires shook my arm and called me "Louis, my boy" ; provincial mammas smiled on me sweetly and asked

if I had seen "their girls"; young men and maidens gave me contemptuous stares, the first because I was a non-hunting anomaly, the sweet girls because of my hoar antiquity; the local colonel of volunteers, with a scathing military demeanour and terribly double-edged remarks on "bad form," pointed me out a rash officer and gentleman who had ventured into the fray in a mess-jacket; the M.F.H., the sun round which our entire county system revolves, gave me an amiable nod. Best of all, after climbing these dazzling social eminences, I found the human sea had cast up at my feet the jewel for which I was seeking, and the next dance on Esmée's ball-card beheld itself ticketed with a vague hieroglyphic, which a hand-writing expert might have discovered was an "L. R."

"I have not danced for years," I remarked, as she finally sent her partner about his business; "less, however, let me assure you, from incompetency and decrepitude than from pure lack of temptation. Now I will dance, or sit, or stand, or even roll on the floor at your orders."

"Well, as my partners have all been very energetic, I really should like a rest," said Esmée, "more especially as I see I shall not be allowed to go away early; our party is all very young and enthusiastic."

"Whose favoured party are you in?" I asked.

"The Duchess of Leicestershire's," she answered, mentioning a local magnate, and adding, "she is my cousin."

"We have got another of your kinswomen with us—Lady Hermione," I said.

"Oh, you can't get away from my cousins; their name is legion."

"Is that a blessing or the reverse? I ask from pure desire for information."

"What, have you no relations?"

"None to speak of."

"Perhaps," said Esmée, with absolute self-betrayal, "it would not be kind to say what I think of relations."

"They are a blessing in disguise, are they?" I supplemented. "Well, we all know what those are, also facts meant to be accepted and not reasoned about—all dear old friends of our nurseries."

"Like the relations," she said, laughing; "though the only relation who came near to sharing my nursery was a most cherished brother."

"Nobody shared mine," I replied; "it was very lonely; it has just struck me how pathetic it was."

"Oh dear, how sad! You had no one to eat your cake and break your toys."

"No one. Miserable starveling that I was! You, on the contrary, had a kind, homely brother to perform these friendly offices."

"Poor Philip! he was much too small; I am afraid I must have stolen his sweets and destroyed his playthings."

"At any rate my childhood was innocent of these crimes," I went on, following up her mood.

"It is rather dreadful, isn't it," she said suddenly, "to think how often one has an opportunity of being kind, and misses it?"

She was using her opportunities to the full at the moment, and I could not tell her so without appearing fulsome.

"People—and children especially," she proceeded, "mind little things so much more than big. I remember, when I was quite a tiny thing, somebody saying, rather sharply, when I ran into a room: 'What do you want here, child?' and I have never forgotten it, or felt that that can have been a very nice person. I suppose I must have been spoilt. But I rather prefer children to be a little

bit spoilt, don't you? It shows that people have loved them."

"Or that they are lovable," I suggested.

"People never think such children lovable," she said, apparently speaking from experience, or from what she believed she had experienced. "I think I have yet to discover what people do consider lovable; and when I discover it, I don't think it will matter, because an universally popular person is one of the most detestable things in the world, so I certainly shouldn't try to be one."

"It never struck me in that light," I said. "I have always been amazed at my own unpopularity, but I attributed it entirely to want of intellect on the part of my critics, not to any lack of effort on my own."

"Are you so much disliked?" she asked, laughing.

"I should think in this particular assembly, I hold exactly the other end of the scale from Sir Algernon Beckford," I replied, pointing out the most popular man present.

"Oh, is that the general?" she asked with interest. "I must make his acquaintance; he might be useful to Philip."

"Oh, Philip's going to be a soldier, is he?"

"Yes," she answered; "I think every man ought to be a soldier—unless he can be a diplomatist."

"A diplomatist?" I repeated, struck by her selection.

Another of her partners, with a joyous air of having found that which he had long sought, came up to her at this juncture, and I was left to the mercies of the crowd, to which I committed myself with some vague idea of going to make myself pleasant to Esmée's chaperon if accessible. I was arrested in my course by a plain young woman whom I had no recollection of ever seeing before, but who accosted me by name and so obviously expected

me to know her that I was obliged to assume a demeanour as if she were one of my oldest friends. I skinned skilfully over the conversational ice, keeping a sharp look out for the least hint of her identity, but only found myself getting further and further from land.

"How's your Emperor, Mr. Randolph?" she asked with sudden abruptness.

"Oh, he's very well," I replied, taken aback.

"So original of you," she went on; "only I think you might let us all see some more of him, you know. Why don't you give a party and show him off?"

"Because it would scarcely be etiquette," I answered, beginning to get irritated with this cool young person.

"I think it's splendid of you," she repeated, "only you oughtn't to bottle him up. Lady Gethin and I mean to come over and get a squint at him."

.Of course, now I remembered! This was Lady Gethin's heiress. No wonder she was such a trying young woman.

"I hope you and Lady Gethin will come later on," I remarked vaguely.

"I think it is splendid of you," she returned, "but you should not keep him to yourself."

This was the third time she had said this same thing in very slightly different words. It was beginning to get monotonous, especially as I did not want Miss Ruggles's approval or her criticism; but remembering that there was somebody who might want her money, I made signals to Tralee, and haling him to the stake, tied him to it by means of an introduction.

I passed them a few minutes later with Lady Hermione, *en route* for the supper-room, and overheard the sparkling heiress ask: "What is the Emperor like?"

"Oh, he's the nicest little Emperor I ever saw," was Tralee's grinning reply.

"I think it's splendid of Mr. Randolph," rejoined the fair Alberta, "only he ought to spread him out a bit."

With a howl which greatly astonished Lady Hermione, I shot out of the doorway of the ball-room into the baize-covered passage beyond. The door of the hall was wide open into the street, an icy blast was blowing in, and men's hands flew to their coat collars and women's to their hair as with expressions of acute misery they hurried to the supper-room. By the open door, a linkman was jumping up and down from one foot to the other, clapping his hands together and emitting sounds expressive of woe; the lamps flickered wildly in the gusts, two or three flakes, like locks from some old man's beard, floated in on to the red baize carpeting, and voices were heard without exclaiming: "What a night! Forty degrees of frost. Nice going the roads'll be! It be a terr'ble noight, sure!" Then the doors banged, and all these untoward visions were shut out into the night together.

On my return to the ball-room the heiress fastened on me once more like a limpet. What she had done with Tralee I do not know, but she drifted up to me in a helpless, untidy sort of way, and asked to be taken to Lady Gethin. We made the entire circuit of the room without discovering that redoubtable chaperon, so Miss Ruggles kindly suggested that we "should not trouble her."

"Let me introduce Mr. Clifford to you," I advanced.

"No, I won't trouble you," she answered.

"Or Mr. Fiennes," I further put forward.

She gave the same answer; did the young woman always make her remarks in threes? Next moment she began again on the Emperor.

"I want to bring my kodak and snapshot your Emperor," she said. "Just think what an opportunity!"

"It's a bad time of year for taking photographs," I began.

"But think of the opportunity!" she repeated.

"Also I shouldn't think the Emperor would make a good subject."

"But you wouldn't have me lose the opportunity?"

"If the photograph doesn't come out, what use is it?" I exclaimed with a feeling of exasperation.

"No, but it's such an oppor——"

"My dear young lady, bring a thousand cameras if you like!"

"Ow, that's splendid of you——"

"Excuse me; I am engaged for this!" I exclaimed, seeing by a lucky chance Esmée partnerless a few paces away.

"You look very much depressed," said the only lady in the world with her charming smile, as I came up.

"I look as I feel, weary of earth and laden with other people's sins," I replied.

She looked sympathetic.

"I am afraid the Emperor of Cathay must be a heavy responsibility," she said.

"My dear lady, give me a little respite from the Emperor! If you knew how that featureless young *protégée* of Lady Gethin's has been persecuting me about him, you would pity my bitter griefs."

"Then quickly let us start a more interesting and less melancholy subject. What can I say to help you to a more cheerful view?"

"You might tell me," I suggested, "where you are going after the Duchess's."

"Ah, that opens out rather a wide question. I may return to London and take up work again, or I may take a longer holiday and do some more country visits."

"But you have no settled plans?"

"No, I never have settled plans."

"How promiscuous ! And no regular address ?"

"Scarcely even that."

"Then you are always on the wing ?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"You see before you the Wandering Jewess. *J'y suis, je n'y reste pas.*"

Will-o'-the-wisp indeed ! Lucky her appearances were sometimes so well-timed.

CHAPTER XIX

THE GLACIAL PERIOD

THE piercing cold which chilled our marrow at the ball, was justified by the extremely severe frost which was found to be reigning in the morning. The lawns in front of the windows were stiff with hoar frost, the little court outside my bedroom was paved with diamond squares, every tree and every blade of grass was outlined in a delicate white tracery ; the stones under the portico rang out under one's feet, the gravel on the terraces no longer rolled and crumbled, and when Tralee and I ran down the slippery steps to the level of the lake before breakfast, the water was frozen as hard as iron. The woods opposite were like fairyland ; the white fur of one of the fancy rabbits flashing from burrow to burrow looked dirty against the frosty background. Tralee and I tried to drown ourselves by seeing if the lake would bear, and returned to eggs and bacon with uproarious appetites. All through the day we kept adding to the roaring fires in all parts of the house, and Violet came out in the garden in a fur coat and talked about skates.

"The worst of it is, if we buy skates it is certain to thaw," she remarked tentatively.

"Don't fear ; this frost has come to stay," returned the instructive Pilkington, and he proved the truer prophet of the two.

For four days the icebound earth relaxed ever so little in the cold sunshine, only to wrap itself tighter than ever at night; until the gardeners and such high authorities, whose knowledge came from experience, declared that "the lake would bear." Thereupon an expedition set out like unto that for the North Pole, with myself as a somewhat unwilling and inefficient Nansen. I am no great skater, and have only just presence of mind enough to remain in a perpendicular position; but Pilkington is a past master of lines and curves, and Tralee thinks he can do great things too, while Fiennes is prepared to try anything, good, bad, or indifferent.

The lake spread out before us, a cup-shaped stretch of black, roughish ice, which cracked ominously now and then; a sign, Tralee earnestly assured us, that it was "all right." Clumps of bulrushes frozen stiff, round whose immersed feet the ice clung white and threatening, softened the grim outline of the banks. A solitary gardener plied his broom vaguely over the surface with a view to improving it for skating purposes. A seat, gracefully improvised by a plank supported on flowerpots, served for our party as a starting-ground from which to put on their skates—I myself spent most of my time there the first day, struggling with the equipment of Cuckoo and his sister—as one by one the others started up, and struggled or skimmed away to a short distance to try their skates and their fastenings. Violet was, of course, last, and was only just on her feet, declaring herself frozen, when the Emperor came down to the edge of the lake.

"Come and skate, sire," shouted Tralee.

"I will teach you," added Pilkington, thirsting to impart knowledge.

Now I feel sure Violet must have thought she ought to be the centre of attraction and not the marauding

potentate from the Far East. At any rate, she did not add her voice to these solicitations, but skimmed away into the middle of the lake, a pretty spot of colour (she was in red) in the black and hoar-grimed landscape. I shouted after her the news that "a piece in the corner has been broken for the ducks. You needn't go there, you know."

The consequence of this information was of course that Violet promptly skated down to investigate, while we blandished the Emperor, who looked like a fury bear on the bank. It appeared that Pilkington's kind offers were superfluous ; the Emperor had learnt to skate as a child and had a rink in his palace of delights at Cambaluc ; but he did not seem in the least anxious to show off his prowess, and it took three able-bodied men ten solid minutes to persuade him to try. Meanwhile Fiennes gave one or two exhibitions of his inelegant way of falling, and Cuckoo shuffled along the edge of the pond in a manner peculiar to himself.

"That's much better," remarked Tralee approvingly, coming back from a quest of Violet in the more remote parts of the lake. He referred to the exploit of the Emperor, who, having allowed himself to be equipped in a pair of "acme" skates, was gliding vaguely in the middle of the sacred arena. "Only that sort of thing's rather pootling, isn't it ? Let's play hockey."

At the magic word hockey, Violet reappeared, all interest. In a moment, she and Tralee had spun coins and divided sides arbitrarily with no reference to our predilections ; in another the game was in full swing. Violet and Tralee played with their whole hearts, Pilkington displayed his usual objectionable expertness, and Fiennes plunged about like an unmannerly buffalo. I thought the Emperor would be out of it ; but lo ! after the first holding

back in uncertainty, his impassive yellow face lighted up and he plunged into the very midst of the fray, flourishing his stick enthusiastically. He bade fair to make a most admirable hockey player.

"Little beggar! he knows we won't hit him and he takes advantage," said Tralee, beaming, during a pause.

I felt such satisfaction as I might in having at last found him an amusement. It was the first time I ever heard him laugh.

The frost lasted, and the diversion of the Emperor likewise. Every morning immediately after breakfast, he gave us no peace till we came down to the lake armed with hockey sticks; the luncheon gong booming faintly through the frosty air alone made him pause in his career, and we had scarcely swallowed our coffee when he haled us out again to play as long as the light lasted. Everything gave way to hockey in those days—not that there was much to yield precedence, for we were idle folk and cumberers of the ground. The some four or four and a half hours of available daylight were exclusively passed on the lake, madly careering up and down after a flying bung. This occupation gave no opportunity for fancy skating, and so quickly palled on Pilkington; after the first few days we had to give him a respite, on pain of losing his valuable services for ever, and to replace him by the rector. His Reverence is a passionate adorer of the pastime, and had been longing every day the frost lasted to join us on the lake, but not daring, for the rectory contingent gave me a wide berth after the missionary episode.

Now, however, I saw a double opportunity for amusing the rector—with great generosity—and for speaking my mind to him about his late guest—with equal freedom.

"Of course you will understand that I knew nothing,

nothing whatever, of this man's true character," he ex-postulated, when I attacked him.

"I am quite aware of that," I rejoined; "and what I want you to do is not to have any dealings with people of whom you know nothing whatever, and to take my word for it that I know what I am talking about."

"I am very sorry for what has passed," he said magnanimously. "I was under a complete misapprehension."

After which recantation, he became so zealous on our behalf that I heard stories of him arresting all sorts of innocent and unsuspecting people and turning them neck and crop out of the village; he became the terror of the country-side. Whether he ever made any attempts on his own account to convert the Emperor in the intervals of hockey, I do not know. At any rate, the Emperor never took any notice, or dreamt of resenting the presence of the foreign priest: it was not in his yellow nature to be a fanatic.

Meanwhile, though the Emperor imbibed a sudden passion for hockey, and though Tralee and Violet and Fiennes asked nothing better than to spend their daylight in ministering to the imperial whim, there was another person to whom it gave great displeasure. As Wu-Chow was taking his daily exercise in the Marble hall, he pounced upon me, passing through in search of a fresh hockey stick.

"It has been in my mind many days to speak to you, great Excellency," he remarked.

"It is an honour to hear you," I said politely. Our voices echoed in that big empty place almost as if it were a church.

"It is concerning the Son of Heaven that I would speak," proceeded Wu-Chow. "It is not seemly that the

Great Dragon should run to and fro and smite with a stick, neither is it according to the proprieties. Such things were never done before in Cathay, and if we do not rule ourselves by the proprieties, whereunto shall our paths lead? Surely the Son of Heaven forgets the wisdom of his ancestors and the ordinances of K'ung-fu-tze."

"The Son of Heaven is taking a turn at the wisdom of *my* ancestors and the ordinances of the English," I returned.

"But it is not well that these things should be," insisted Wu-Chow. "The Prince Yih, in saving the Great Pure One from the hands of his enemies, never intended that he should become a man without dignity, even as the common people. Better had Sung-Taou remained before the Great Dragon, and spoken to him of all the evil things he learnt in foreign lands; for at least Sung-Taou never placed a stick in the Great Pure One's hands, nor flew on the face of the waters on wings of steel, to thrust the Son of Heaven hither and thither and to smite a piece of wood."

"How do you know that all these things happen?" I asked.

"Have I not looked forth from an upper window and seen all these evil things?" he answered reproachfully, "and have I not wept that the Son of Heaven should forget his glory?"

It was no good my arguing. Wu-Chow thought his Emperor very undignified, and was scandalised past all hope of conciliation.

"I'll tell you what you had better do, Wu-Chow," I suggested; "go and look out of the windows on the opposite side of the house, and there you'll find everything quite peaceful and nothing to disturb you."

Wu-Chow recognised the futility of remonstrance.

"I am a miserable old man," he remarked, as he

waddled off. "I have seen the shame of the Son of Heaven."

When I told the Emperor, he took it with supreme indifference; he did not value Wu-Chow's opinion or care about his feelings, for I am afraid his Majesty was not very considerate. He liked hockey, and I had assured him that the Prince of Wales and innumerable other puissant ones of the earth had been known to play it, and Wu-Chow might go to the deuce.

One short January afternoon was just closing in on a game, when I, who was keeping goal, heard the sound of wheels on the gravel above the terraces; I took my eyes for a moment from the scrimmage in the midst of which Tralee, Violet, and the rector were scrambling for the bung, with the Emperor hovering on the outskirts waiting for an opportunity for his favourite manœuvre of pouncing in under their sticks, for he never adventured himself into too close an affray, and to my horror I saw Lady Gethin's victoria drive to the edge of the terraces, and Lady Gethin herself and the heiress preparing to come down to our level. Lady Gethin waved her hand in a sprightly manner and called out something undistinguishable. The other players were much too busy to look up, including Fiennes, the other goal-keeper, who employed his leisure in roaring out directions. I shouted to the Blessed Damozel, who was sliding all by herself in a quiet corner, and told her to run at once up to the house and telephone down to the lodge that no other carriages were to be let through, neither was this indulgence to be extended again to Lady Gethin's. Then I abandoned my post to go and meet my unwelcome guests.

"How do you do, dear Mr. Randolph, how do you do?" called out Lady Gethin in her most kittenish manner. "You see we have come at last."

“Ow, where is the Emperor?” asked Miss Ruggles at once without further circumlocution.

“It is so cold out here; won’t you go indoors?” I suggested hastily. “You will find Lady Frances in the house; this game will be over in a moment, and I will come up.”

Lady Gethin looked yielding, but the heiress had advanced on to the ice and was staring with all her powers.

“Do tell me where the Emperor is,” she repeated.

At that moment I had to fly back to protect my goal from a determined onslaught by Tralee, feebly withstood by Chin-Wang himself; the rector was out of it. I collided crashingly with Tralee, as I hit the bung away from under his stick, for, as I explained before, I am not an adroit skater, and the Emperor took an instant advantage of this *contretemps*. With one skilful stroke he removed the theatre of war to the other side of the ground, and I glided back to the advancing Miss Ruggles.

“Shall we be allowed to see the Emperor?” she began again.

“He’s over there, playing hockey,” I returned, weary of her pertinacity.

“Is he?” she exclaimed, with underlined italics in her voice. “Do point him out to me.”

I really could not in the gathering dusk; I believe I told her Mr. Abercrombie was the Celestial potentate.

“I do think it is splendid——” she began, and I fled.

In another minute the game was over, and resigning my place to Samuel, I renewed my entreaties to Miss Ruggles and her chaperon to come up to the house; or rather, swiftly ceasing to entreat, I demanded, and if Miss Ruggles was obstinate, I was determined, and turned a

deaf ear to her expressed desires. We found my sister-in-law very frigid, and the amiable heiress sulked openly; Lady Gethin alone gushed on unquenched. Also when, half an hour later, the other players came in, the Emperor, hearing that strangers were in the Arabic room, where we usually had tea, of course went off to his own quarters. Miss Ruggles's face fell visibly at the appearance one by one of the rest, and the only thing I could suggest to alleviate the pangs of disappointment from which she so obviously was suffering, was that Fiennes should show her the portrait he had painted of the Emperor.

"Of course it's not finished, you know," remarked Fiennes, delightedly stripping it out of its cover.

The heiress stood before it dumb, but Lady Gethin fired off ecstatic ejaculations.

"Delightful! charming! how very clever! and I am sure it is a speaking likeness!"

Fiennes had taken the Emperor sitting in a chair, looking at the light with a characteristic expression of the utmost boredom; which indeed I think his Majesty had frankly worn during the whole of every sitting. A book was on his knee to which he was paying no attention, being apparently in the midst of a dream of his lost empire or some similar unenlivening subject. It was very like Chin-Wang, but not in his lighter moments.

"He must be a good-looking man for a Mongolian," exclaimed Lady Gethin, apparently casting about for complimentary remarks to make; "and in European clothes too. How very interesting!"

Having seen the picture, I think our guests realised that this was all they would see, and retired from the scene of action. As I repassed through the outer hall after putting them into their Victoria Williams accosted me.

"Two ladies was stopped at the gate, sir, by your

orders," he observed, "and left cards on 'er ladyship, halso a note for you, sir."

As I tore open the note, I glanced mechanically at the cards. They bore the name of the Duchess of Leicestershire, and the note was from Esmée, asking why she had not been admitted. I swore. This system of closing the park gates, then, cut two ways. Calmer reflections taught me to bless Fate ; what a *rencontre* there would have been between Esmée and Giles's mother !

CHAPTER XX

LOW CLASS TRAGEDY

WHEN the frost broke up, the whole of my house party left Blatchford, except the children, and I was really rather thankful. With an empty house it was far more easy to preserve incognito than when it was so much overrun with people that it became impossible to explain to outsiders why their presence was not desirable. I often felt much inclined to tell them point blank that I would not admit them lest they should be murderers themselves, or bring murderers concealed about their persons ; it would so effectively have discouraged them. But in the end a feeling of politeness or shyness or something held me back. Something always does hold one back from making one's best *coup* in life. Meanwhile, when everybody had gone, even Pilkington, the "neighbours," seeing that I gave no signs of life, surmised that I too was away and ceased from troubling. So the Emperor, the Blessed Damozel, Cuckoo, and I had the park to ourselves and enjoyed it very much. We did nothing at all all day and every day with the greatest happiness, and soon were in the intellectual position to report on all epigrams concerning lack of history and good fortune.

The first disturbance in our routine was so slight that it was only our peculiar circumstances which made it notice-

able at all. It arose from the retirement or death, I forget which, of a keeper, and the instalment of another in his place. I inspected the new arrival, and he seemed to be a quiet and amiable young man, bearing the most excellent references, though from a far-off birthplace, which was a drawback.

"I suppose he'll do all right, Parsons," I remarked to my head keeper, a person of considerable antiquity and reliability.

"Well, he might do tolerable, sir," returned Parsons, grudgingly and of necessity, there being no obvious grounds for objecting to the man, "and then again he mightn't," he added after a pause.

"But I suppose I'd better engage him," I hazarded.

"Well, ye might do worse, sir," was all Parsons would admit.

Really he thought well of the man, and knew I knew it, but it was not his north-country way to be effusive in commendation.

"Then that settles it," I said, turning away. "Of course he must be made to understand all my rules about people getting into the park, and so on, that I have arranged for his Majesty's safety."

"I'll have a word with him, sir," assented Parsons.

"I don't suppose he'll ever set eyes on his Majesty." I don't know what prompted me to make this remark.

"That wouldn't be for the likes of him," returned Parsons, with scornful superiority.

There is a little bit of a river—the Blatch—which runs through my park in the form of an irregular S and joins a sister river of bigger dimensions about half a mile from the most southerly park gate; it feeds the lake, provides us with some weeks' trout-fishing, and is a pleasant, friendly little stream, that to my mind is the chief feature of

Blatchford. Take away the little Blatch, tinkling pleasantly over its pebbles, and you would despoil the place of all attraction and make of it an ugly barrack standing in a ridiculous sham park over a silly pond made with hands, the very triumph of affectation and artificiality. The Blatch is always with us, and we hear its merry little voice every day of our lives, but as winter melts into spring, it enters more into our constant thoughts. Our numbers were too reduced for hockey, and as the Emperor began to mope for want of an amusing employment, it was to the Blatch's friendly banks that I took him and taught him how to cast a fly. He went through all the usual phases of the beginner, caught the trees, the stones, or his own coat, and required a perfect army of attendants to disentangle his line from all the extraneous matter round which it managed to twine itself; but he persevered in his stolid Celestial way, and when at last he saw a shining little trout jumping about on the wet pebbles at his feet, his whole face lighted up just as it had done at his first hockey match. His usual deprecating smile was exchanged for a decided grin of satisfaction.

"Well done, sire," I said encouragingly.

"Yes, I think it is very well done," he replied, surprisingly free from *mauvaise honte*.

Cuckoo bent down and poked the fish with his finger; then squeaked because it jumped, and fled behind the Blessed Damozel. Cuckoo lacks, I regret to say, the instincts of a sportsman.

"Damozel, do you think you will soon be able to do likewise?" I asked my great-niece, who was looking on with great excitement.

"Oh yes, very soon, Uncle Louis," she returned confidently; "the Majesty-Emperor and me will have a race, and see which catches the mostest fishes quickest."

“Fishes nasty cold wet sings,” observed Cuckoo from behind his sister’s skirts.

“Good to eat,” said Chin-Wang turning round to him. “Coo-coo shall have this one to eat for his supper.”

“Not want it,” returned the ungracious Cuckoo; “want to eat nice foods for mine suppy.”

“I would like to eat it awfully much, Majesty-Emperor,” remarked the Blessed Damozel ingratiatingly.

“You shall have it, little daughter,” said the Emperor, as if he were dispensing some life-and-death boon.

“Then *you* shall have the first fish *I* catch,” said the impartial Damozel. “Uncle Louis, be quick and teach me to catch fishes.”

“Suppose you be quick and learn,” I suggested.

The Blessed Damozel hopped about on the stones. Her favourite gambol consisted of standing on one leg and twisting the other round it; this on a slippery stone looked dangerous, and I watched her with an apprehensive eye. The Emperor was casting again, and oscillating gently between one large rounded stone and another, with his eyes fixed on the water. There was a slip, a scramble and a splash, and I, in readiness to save the Blessed Damozel from the consequences of her own rash actions, found myself enlisted on behalf of the Ruler of Cathay. The Blatch was not deep, so there was no danger, and the Emperor was duly equipped with thick fishing boots; but the momentary *contretemps* brought a man out of the woods close by with profuse and unnecessary offers of help, which I declined. It was the new keeper.

“Are we going to lunch out of doors, Uncle Louis?” the Blessed Damozel wished to know. “Because I think it would be much nicer. I don’t see why one lives so much in houses, when it’s so *delicious* out here.”

“Well, I think it’s rather early in the year for *al fresco*

repasts," I remarked ; it was March. " Suppose we have lunch in the little fishing cottage up in the wood."

" Oh yes, a much better plan ! " returned the Damozel in her most grown-up manner. " What do you think, Majesty-Emperor ? "

These two were excellent friends ; Chin-Wang spoilt the Blessed Damozel egregiously, even more than Cuckoo ; for, as he lucidly remarked once, " Coo-coo is sweet to love and to play with, but my little daughter understands."

We were lunching very comfortably in the cottage off savoury cold meats, and talking busily between whiles, when Cuckoo, who had been fidgeting in his chair and sniffing the air like a disturbed puppy dog, threw himself upon me with a yell.

" There's somebody looking in at the window ! " he squealed.

For one moment I was startled ; then the Blessed Damozel reassured me.

" Don't be frightened, Uncle Louis," she said in her superior way ; " Cuckoo always thinks people are looking in at the window ; they're only pretence people that he makes up."

" They's not, they's real peoples," howled Cuckoo.

" Oh, they're an article of your religion, are they, Cuckoo ? " I said.

" Is Coo-coo's religion not the same as yours ? " asked the Emperor suddenly.

" Not this part of it, sire ; I think it's quite private—copyright, in fact. Cheer up, Cuckoo, old man, there isn't really anybody there."

" Louis," remarked the Emperor after a pause in which he had apparently been reflecting deeply on my assertion, " I notice the English people talk much of religion. But if religion is true, what is there to talk about ? "

That was his way, in the middle of some perfectly childish inconsequence, to break in with some saying of this sort.

"Well, sire, few people have yet discovered that argument is a weak and useless thing, and that it requires a rarely clear head to see reason stronger than its own delusions, and so I suppose they will go on talking and arguing under the supposition that they will some day convince some one who thinks differently."

"You cannot convince one if his experience is something else," said the Emperor shrewdly. "But you can cut his head off," he added, as a brilliant solution to the difficulty.

I laughed.

"We won't cut Cuckoo's head off because he thinks he has seen somebody through the window who wasn't there, will we?" I asked.

"They was there," replied Cuckoo; who, though very soft, is very obstinate.

"When I go home, I think I shall put to death all my relations," was the startling observation the Emperor next uttered. "I do not see the use of relations, they are all jealous, and I would wear mourning more gladly than any other dress."

"A good many people feel with you, sire, even though it is not usual to give expression to such natural emotions."

The Blessed Damozel was listening with her mouth open.

"I thought," she remarked, "that one always had to say, 'God bless my relations and friends' when one says one's prayers."

"Quite right, Damozel," I replied, when the Emperor interrupted me by the disconcerting assertion:

"But God will be better able to bless them in Heaven, where they are near at His hand."

I felt this morality was of a kind which I could not allow to be preached openly to my great-niece at her tender age.

"His Majesty is only joking, Damozel," I interposed; "people don't really kill people now-a-days unless they have done something bad. The naughty old times when people were killed in cartloads at a time are over now."

"But these things can be managed always," insisted the Emperor.

I laughed by way of conveying to the Blessed Damozel that this was humour, and her puzzled face cleared.

"You won't kill Uncle Louis, Majesty-Emperor," she said, tossing the hair out of her eyes.

"No, I will make Louis Liu-Pu-Shang-Shu" (head of a Government Office), "and he shall wear the carbuncle button at all my courts," returned the Emperor. A splendid prospect for me!

As the spring days went by, we spent them more and more by the river and in the primrose-starred woods, till the quick-running waters of the Blatch grew tired of reflecting the slim figure of the Emperor, rod poised on hip, or parting the air in a semi-circular cast, and the sloping stone-strewn banks of re-echoing the whirr of his reel. At his side, the Blessed Damozel would struggle with a small rod, learning to cast, or fish with a float for humble roach and bream. Cuckoo utterly declined to attempt the extirpation of the finny tribe; his poor father, a passionate lover of sport in every shape, would have wept over his degenerate son, and my only consolation was to remember the tender years of Cuckoo, whose fourth birthday had yet to dawn. At first, I never let the Emperor out of my own sight, but as the days went on, and it began to pall on me always to fish over the pools after his Celestial Majesty, I grew, I admit, careless, and would walk down a bend of the river, or even cross it, leaving

my imperial charge with the old fisherman. He could come to no harm, I thought, though I scarcely reflected on the subject at all; nor did he for many days.

It was an April morning, and the fish were taking splendidly; there was no sun and the river ran with a sultry little roar. The Emperor was having capital sport, and the Blessed Damozel danced excitedly at his heels, while the ancient fisherman made remarks unintelligible through lack of teeth and excess of dialect. I, with Cuckoo in tow, walked through the woods, which were starry with primroses and white anemones, while young rooks cawed in the budding tree-tops, and we emerged on the bank of the river some hundred and fifty yards further up where was a notable deep pool. Cuckoo struggled across the big boulders with some difficulty and sat down with a dissatisfied sigh; he did think fishing such a stupid amusement, and it was only the honour and glory of being out with me and no nurse that braced him to endure it. As he sat there, watching with mournful eyes the spectacle of his revered uncle flogging the pool, we heard a shot in the woods.

"Litsen!" said Cuckoo, in a tremulous little voice, for he knew he ought not to speak out fishing, "mens is shooting yabbits. Pore little yabbits!"

"Perhaps he hasn't hit——" I began, when there suddenly rose on the air a series of shrill screams, which swept down the bend of the river in a tornado. Rabbits? no, my Gad! it was the Blessed Damozel's voice.

"It's Sissy! it's Sissy!" squealed Cuckoo; and seizing my hand with a blind instinct as to what I should do, "don't leave me, Uncle Louis, don't leave me, I's so dreffly frightened!"

I threw him over my shoulder and, scaling the bank, ran as hard across the short cut through the woods as it

was in me to go. As I ran, I cursed myself industriously for having let the Emperor out of my sight, and the old fisherman for indefinite crimes. I arrived on the river's edge, breathless, to see the Blessed Damozel flying towards me, hands outstretched, screaming with all her breath. On a stone in the middle of the stream sat the Emperor, still grasping his rod, and gazing rather dazedly at his hand, which was stained by the blood running down his face, and on the opposite bank I saw my new keeper, the gentleman of excellent references, taking deliberate aim at his Majesty with a shot gun.

With a yell, I dropped Cuckoo and sprang down the bank, snatching my revolver from my pistol pocket. At sight of me, charging into mid stream on murder obviously intent, the man turned and fled. His course was short, for I winged him before he reached the top of the bank.

CHAPTER XXI

THE COUNTY CACKLES, THE BENCH BEAMS, AND THE SCOFFERS SMILE

FOR three minutes the Blessed Damozel and I faced each other, mute and breathless. Then I found voice to tell her to run for help ; she looked me squarely in the face, and set off at her top speed without a word. I advanced to where the Emperor sat, still holding his rod, and examined his wound ; it was a mere scratch on his cheek, but it was bleeding a good deal, and Cuckoo, who had followed me, wept copiously at the sight. I dipped my handkerchief in the river and washed the blood away, trying the while to encourage and cheer the Emperor. He only looked at me mournfully, and said in his own language :

“ ‘ Alas ! how can I be saved ? There is nought more bitter than an early death. Do not the gods desire to gain eternal youth ? ’ ”

I, recognising a classic Confucian quotation, returned :

“ I am here, sire ; it’s all safe. There’ll be no deaths, except of your enemies, while I’m about.”

He pulled himself to his feet by my arm, and stood holding it in both his hands and looking at me with the sad and terrified expression which had died out of his face of late.

"Courage, sire, courage," I said.

Cuckoo rubbed his cheek on my other cuff, and whimpered.

Hereupon the old fisherman hobbled up in great distress of mind; he had been sent by the Emperor to fetch something necessary, as he was explaining to me tremulously, when the dauntless Damozel came dashing back at the head of most of the household staff, Williams and two six-foot footmen eagerly leading.

"There's a man hurt over there," I remarked, pointing across the river, and checking the observations they were all agog to pour forth, "and I hope to God he's badly hurt. Pick him up and bring him to the house, and one of you go for the constable."

I waited to see the injured man brought over the river, and Williams waited with me, his immovable calm much shaken; as to the other men servants, I heard them talking nineteen to the dozen, as they forded the shallow river. The incident caused much sensation. There was such chattering and cackling in the servants' wing that it penetrated through all the doors of communication, and brought down a stern order for silence. Wu-Chow shook his head dismally, and bemoaned himself at great length, detaining me long after midnight to hear his lamentations, and Pilkington, to whom I telegraphed the news, came instantly down from London, and looked gloomy on it.

As if it were not enough to have my nerve shaken over such an occurrence, I had to face much ridicule and not a little censure. I, of course, prosecuted the man, and when I admitted to the magistrate that I had shot him with my revolver, there was a general murmur of indignation in court. I was obviously looked upon as a far more savage and unsafe character than the man who had made a cold-blooded attempt to murder the Emperor. The

sentimentality of the English nation is a thing beyond belief at times ; it almost invariably leads public opinion to espouse the wrong side. I lost my temper at once.

"Yes, I shot him, and I wish to God I had killed the scoundrel," I exclaimed.

"Is—er—the victim of the "alleged" assault in court?" asked the magistrate.

"No, he is not ; his health does not permit of it," I returned. It would have been of no use to say that I could not hear of bringing the Emperor of Cathay into a police court. Pilkington went into the box after me and gave evidence that Chin-Wang was suffering from nervous prostration.

"The wound then was not serious ?" asked the magistrate.

"Not in itself, but the frail state of his Majesty's health," said Samuel ominously, "is such that there is no telling what the consequences may be."

I saw a faint smile on the magistrate's face at the words "his Majesty" reflected in the open grins of everybody else in court.

When Pilkington, with a countenance of the utmost severe solemnity, vacated the box, the tousled head of the Blessed Damozel appeared therein. Miss Clifford not being self-conscious, was perfectly delighted at the conspicuous position in which she found herself, and gave her evidence in a clear shrill voice that re-echoed above the gruff tones of the magistrate in quaint contrast. She was surprisingly lucid in her story, and stuck obstinately to the point, namely, that the wicked man having tried to shoot the Majesty-Emperor, her own noble part in the proceedings was to scream for Uncle Louis.

"And the Majesty-Emperor was all over blood," she remarked two or three times, in tones of awe, this having

evidently struck her as the worst part of the proceeding. Neither Pilkington nor I had prompted her for fear of confusing her small mind, so that what she said was entirely evolved from her own divine genius. She came away in a great state of vainglory because the magistrate said, "Thank you, Miss Clifford, that will do."

"I wish we could have a trial every day, Uncle Louis," she remarked afterwards.

Williams testified to the fact of the Emperor being wounded, and the footmen to having picked up his would-be murderer; Parsons gave evidence on the references of the new keeper, and concurred with the local doctor in saying emphatically that he did not think the man insane; the other under-keepers were equally positive that the man was in his right mind, and also that he was not in the habit of drinking to excess. In face of this, the magistrate, though obviously anxious to let the man off, was obliged to commit him for trial. He, however, took the opportunity to censure me heavily for my "hasty and ill-advised action" in firing at the man, and hinted that it was lucky for me the consequences were so slight.

I went home in a towering rage, which was not diminished when I opened the newspapers next morning. The local rag, delirious with importance, had three columns about the event, and expressed itself with the utmost virulence against the brutal landlord who shot his *employé*—no word of the brutal *employé* who shot a man that had done him no harm. Not one of the London papers but had some scathing paragraph on the subject.

"Perhaps it is too strong to call Mr. Randolph a monomaniac," was about the kindest thing they said of me.

Worse to bear than this was the conduct of "the county." Notes, telegrams and cards showered in at my lodge gates during the orthodox nine days of wonder, and

I was asked to at least three dinners and five luncheons daily, besides lengthier sojourns. Furious at being treated as a lion, I refused them all, till one arrived which broke down my resolution : it was from the Duchess of Leicestershire, and Esmée was again staying in her house ; I wavered and was lost. Melton, the abode of the Duchess, was ten miles off, a long distance to go for a meal, but then the magnet—— The Duchess collects lions, and I was weak and allowed her to collect me, but it was not for love of her *beaux yeux*.

My own folly only dawned on me when I discovered that I was seated between Lady Gethin and Miss Ruggles ; Esmée was on the other side of the table, monopolised by one of the sons of the house, and I could see her Titian head thrown back, as her gesture was in animated discussion. By straining my ears and turning a rude inattention to my neighbours, I could catch the high liquid tones of her voice, and her decided utterances.

"Ow, is the Emperor all right again?" buzzed Miss Ruggles into one ear.

"What a terrible shock it must have been ! Poor dear man, I do pity him!" gurgled Lady Gethin into the other.

These two ladies said nothing in the least worth recording ; their entire conversation was on the pattern above presented, the one asking irritating and foolish questions, the other making gushing and still more foolish remarks. And all the time, I sank lower and lower in a slough of despond deeper than any dreamt of by Bunyan. Of course I was mad. Mad to care, mad to think about her, mad to fancy any woman who loved Giles—Giles of the rabbit mouth and the twittering voice—could look upon me without a shudder of repulsion, mad (for that matter) to suppose that any woman, even without a

predisposition in Giles's favour, could see anything in me to admire except my banking account. But in this we are all mad, neither is there any mental Pasteur to brand us with hot irons and sear our madness out of us.

I never suffered from delusions as to what people thought of me, and I knew that everybody at that table looked upon me as a blazing meteor of eccentricity, but I knew also that my own mania and folly far surpassed anything they conceived. My only saving grace was the retention of just so much presence of mind as to avoid staring at Esmée, and to feign a certain attention to the babblings of Lady Gethin and Miss Ruggles. But that I was far past flattery, I should have been gratified by their assiduities; the men on their other sides competed with my attractions in vain. I owed the Emperor much, no doubt, but would so willingly have dispensed with the debt.

Even Purgatory does not last for ever, and the most modern and long-drawn-out of luncheons reaches the coffee and liqueur stage at last. So that day; and when the Duchess was sated with the conversation of the Parliamentary magnate who sat one side of her, and of the legal light who occupied the chair on the other, we all moved out of the dining-room into a sort of cloister giving invitingly on to the garden. I should imagine, if I believed in such things, that one would lose half the flavour of Heaven if one did not first taste of Purgatory, and I feel sure my enforced participation in the society of Lady Gethin and the fair Alberta added a zest to that after-luncheon stroll in the garden with Esmée Sidney. Here there were none to notice how intently I watched the effects of the pale April sunlight on her ruddy hair, or to jeer at the singular vacuousness of my remarks and rejoinders. Lady Gethin and her monotonous charge,

'the lion-pursuing Duchess and her celebrities, all were enveloped in a mist of merciful distance, and the fantastically clipped yew alleys of the garden made a labyrinth in which I would gladly have lost my way and wandered for ever. Golden and purple crocuses peered up out of narrow earthy borders, and little birds twittered inspiritingly in the shelter of the yew branches; the very statues, planted here and there with an affectation of classicality, seemed to look upon us sympathetically as we passed. I felt that the divisions of the calendar were arbitrary, and that this was indeed the first day of spring.

Half an hour or so we loitered in the garden, and then Esmée led me to the house by another route from that by which we had left it. Thus I suppose it was that as we approached a French window we caught the strident tones of Miss Ruggles,—

"But, after all, it is very ridiculous! I don't see why you encourage him."

"It is amusing, that's why," said the Duchess's voice, drawling with the insolence of known superiority; "an originality is quite piquant now-a-days from its scarcity."

"But it is absurd," insisted Miss Ruggles, well launched on one of her famous triple remarks: "I think he ought to be told so."

"Not at all. Few men in these days would spend time and money for a whim in that lavish manner, and it is most interesting to speculate how long the whim will last," returned the Duchess.

"I am not up in Cervantes," the legal lion was heard modestly remarking, "but I believe Don Quixote found the windmills tough customers."

"This Mr.—what is his name? Randolph—will get himself into trouble sooner or later," thundered the Parliamentary lion. "I believe already notice has been

taken of the matter by the Foreign Office ; the thing will become a public nuisance."

"A sham Emperor—just think how ridiculous !" exclaimed Alberta.

"Shades of the almighty dollar !" I whispered to Esmée ; "and who so interested in his Celestial Majesty as was erewhile our only heiress ? "

We exchanged glances and laughed. So had half an hour among the yew alleys soothed my irascible temper. Fresh from the luncheon-table, I should have bounced in on those people and denounced them all.

CHAPTER XXII

THE TROUBLES OF A TARGET

"I SHOULD hate love in a cottage," said Violet emphatically; "cottages are always so stuffy, and the rain would be sure to come through the roof."

"But then you could put up an umbrella," rejoined Tralee with much more earnestness than the subject seemed to demand.

"I should prefer hatred in a ducal mansion," reflected Violet fretfully, and threw pieces of wool and silk at Cuckoo, who tried contentedly to catch them.

"What is Love-in-a-cottage, Louis?" asked the Emperor.

"Who has been talking to you, sire?" I returned, hardly attending to what he said.

"I am sure that was the word," said the Emperor reflectively.

From the Long hall came Tralee's voice shouting, not over tunefully, a nigger song :

"I always was a coon dat lubbed de gals,
Deir great big eyes as black as night a-makin',
A-prinklin', blinkin', twinklin' deir fal-lals,
And cunnin' little footsies coyly shakin'.

 But how am I
 To fix ma eye
 On one when all de lot's so montious takin'?"

And Violet's high voice chimed in in the chorus :

"For dere's Sapphira,
I do admire her;
She's as sweet as she can be.
And dere is Dinah,
None could be finer
'Mong de gals, you'd tink, as she."

Tralee banged a few chords on the long-suffering piano, and back to the Emperor and myself in the Arabic room swung the strain :

"De gals on our plantation am so sweet,
Dey might to any king de scarf be flingin'.
A heart must be of stone dat does not beat,
To hear 'em 'mid de cotton-fields a-singin'.
How can I say
I'll fix de day
To set de final weddin' bells a-ringin'?"

Again the shouted chorus :

"For dere is Kitty,
She am so pretty;
And dere's Floss, so straight and tall ;
And little Maisie,
And dainty Daisy,
Drives me mad atween dem all."

"That's Tralee all over," Pilkington's superior scornful voice was heard to supplement the song by asseverating.

"It ought to fetch the Emperor," remarked Tralee; "polygamy, don't you know, and all that sort of game. Let's have another song."

"Is that it, Louis?" asked Chin-Wang lucidly.

"Is that what, sire?"

"What Tra-Lee sings. Is that Love-in-a-cottage?"

"It would be a crowded cottage, it strikes me, sire."

I was trying to write letters, so my answers were of necessity slightly vague ; besides, by this time I had discovered the hopelessness of explaining anything which savoured of the figurative to the Emperor. His Mongolian mind was far too literal to grasp images.

Now Tralee was singing "Lousiana Lou," and the droning notes of the chorus, "Lou-ou-ou-ou-ou-ou, ou-ou-ou-ou-ou," hummed through our half-open door. Again the Emperor looked up, and moved restlessly in his chair.

"Lu, Lu—Tsi-Lu, that was my mother's name, and she called me Tan-Yo (Music of the Dawn), because I was born when the sun was rising. It was in the ninth month, and nine is the sacred number ; but it has brought me no happiness, no fortune. They let me stand no more between Heaven and my people. Louis, I have dreamed dreams."

"Pay no attention to dreams, sire, they go by contraries."

"I saw Sung-Taou," he persisted, taking no notice of my inspiriting remark ; "he rose from the grave of his fathers, and cried to me that the shadow of sorrow is upon me, and that blood will be on my garments. And I believe Sung-Taou, Louis."

"No man, but Sung-Taou only, eh ?" I said, bracing up as I realised that my Emperor had suddenly fallen into a very melancholy and superstitious frame of mind. "Never mind, sire, I'll see if I can't settle it. I wouldn't allow the ghost of Sung-Taou to interfere with me, or any other man, living or dead."

"Sung-Taou never deceived me living," remarked the Emperor dubiously, "and he would not deceive me dead. Besides," he added, "white butterflies hovered by my window this morning, and there will be death in the house."

"Oh, they are very common in May, sire," I answered reassuringly ; "these are the first warm days we have had this year, and all the sleeping insects were bound to come

to life again, confound them ! Not but what butterflies are innocent enough," I added hastily, "but they can't resuscitate without the flies and wasps, worse luck."

"Lou, Lou, I lub you,
I lub you, dat's true !
Don't sigh, don't cry,
You'll see me in de mornin'.
Dream, dream, dream of me."

The Emperor shuddered.

"Tell Tra-Lee not to sing that song any more ! It is not a fortunate song."

Visions of the night had unhinged Chin-Wang ; in another moment, he would have become irritable. Closing the blotter on my unfinished letters, I got up to give the desired directions to Tralee ; I was facing the window, which looks out over a patch of garden and beyond on to the road through the park which communicates with the servants' quarters. Upon this road I saw Violet's maid and her mother's footman, apparently in the full process known to those orders as "walking out." Now I do not, like certain tyrannical old ladies, object to the servants making love to each other as much, or in as peculiar a fashion as they like ; but I do stipulate that they should do it where they cannot be seen. My annoyance drew my attention to the fact that the footman, of whom I had before taken no notice, was not the same whom I was accustomed to see in attendance on my sister-in-law. This added considerably to my displeasure.

"I do wish, Violet," I said, after I had silenced Tralee, pacified the Emperor and decoyed my niece into another room, "that your mother would consult me before she brings down strange servants."

"Um—um," mumbled Violet, lighting a cigarette. She likes to pretend she is a smoker, the purest pose on her

part, and one carefully practised in her mother's absence.
“Who's strange, Louis ?” she finally articulated.

“Your footman.”

“Oh, of course ! The other one is ill ; this one's quite new.”

“The deuce he is ! I shall tell Williams to keep an eye on him,” said I.

“Why, what has he done ?”

“It is not what he has done, my dear, it is what he might do, that concerns me.”

“And he might——?”

“Murder the Emperor.”

“Louis, you have got the murder of the Emperor on the brain.” Violet gave three puffs at her cigarette, and then, as usual, let it go out. “You will end by suspecting everybody. The kitchen-maid might put arsenic in the soup ; the housemaid might asphyxiate the Emperor by stuffing a feather bed up the chimney ; the odd man might drop a coal-scuttle on his head. I wonder you allow mamma here ! If her eyes were pistols, the Emperor certainly woulan't be long alive. Don't you notice her elaborate manœuvres not to see him when he comes into the room, so as not to have to stand up, and to avoid him when she says good morning or good night to us all, lest she should have to make a curtsey ?”

“We won't discuss the subject, my dear ; we might talk for ever——”

“Heaven forbid !” interpolated Violet.

“And you would never convert me, or I you.”

“Yes, you would. I should agree from sheer exhaustion. However, let us talk about something else.”

“There is Giles,” I began ; “I have long wanted to ask you how his affairs are going on.”

"Oh, how can I tell you?" rejoined Violet in a bored and disgusted voice. "Giles never confides in me, and I don't think he does in mamma, or she would tell me in floods of tears."

"I have never been able clearly to make out," I said, punctuating my remarks by furious puffs at my cigar, "whether Giles is definitely engaged to this lady or not. On the only occasion when I approached the subject to him, he gave me to understand that he was not."

"Well, he told Aunt Ulrica, who told mamma, that he was, or at any rate he meant to be."

"Ah!" I remarked, "it's not quite the same thing."

"Well, I think the whole affair is extremely silly," announced Violet. "What do people want to go and get engaged and married for? Why can't they be content to stay as they are?"

"Perhaps they look upon it as a means of subsistence," I suggested, "like Tralee."

"Like Lord Tralee? What do you mean?"

"Only that I believe Tralee is at last going to take my very excellent advice and marry an heiress. His keenness to come down here for Whitsuntide appears to me to point this way, as there certainly is no attraction, unless it's Miss Ruggles."

"Do you think Miss Ruggles so very attractive?" asked Violet.

"I don't personally. But then I'm not a penniless and susceptible Irish peer."

"But Lord Tralee has always been rather a--rather a flirt, hasn't he?" pursued Violet, hesitating over the epithet, and poking at the arm of her chair as if she meant to make holes in it.

"Yes, but the most confirmed of flirts must mean business at last. Moreover, it is a profession which leaves

us often sooner than we leave it. At three-and-twenty, we have no intentions; but at three-and-thirty we begin to want the girls to have intentions. And they generally have plenty, bless their hearts!"

"I hate that way of talking about girls!" exclaimed Violet petulantly.

"What, calling down blessings on them? Would you think it more flattering of me to say, 'Curse 'em'?"

"No, I mean talking as if all girls were always manœuvring and intriguing to get married. All girls don't want to marry. Lots of them would rather not."

"Then it's very unnatural of them," I said; "we all want to marry the right person, man, woman, and child, and small blame to us!"

"Well, I don't think any man is worth the trouble of marrying," announced Violet, "when you think of all you have to go through, what with buying your trousseau, and putting it into the *Morning Post* and announcing the engagement to your relations (who are all certain to be perfectly horrid about it); it is far wiser and more peaceful to remain a spinster."

"You wait till the Right Person comes along, and you'll alter your note," I retorted.

"No, I sha'n't," snapped Violet.

"Oh, glorious Right Person! oh, fascinating, elusive Right Person!" I cried regretfully, "rarer than flowering aloes and more unattainable than the mountains of the moon! bringing the sunshine when you come and taking it away when you go. Exacting, distracting Right Person! Will-of-the-wisp. . . . always out of reach, always."

"Are you quite mad, Louis?" It was Lady Frances in Violet that spoke.

"Yes, quite," I responded, throwing away the stump of my cigar; "and if you had committed the crowning

extravagance of adopting a real live Emperor, you would find yourself ripe for committing all other extravagances, even to talking nonsense on a Whitsunday evening to your niece."

"Well, I must go and dress for dinner," said Violet, in the same disapproving and repressive tone.

The rector and his wife and eldest daughter were to dine with us that night as a sort of Whitsunday festival. For them, I would add, not for us. I can but envy the mind to which a dinner in somebody else's house is in itself an event to rejoice over. I came down early, and the first sight that met my eyes, as I passed the foot of the crooked little staircase from the Emperor's quarters just above mine, was that of my sister-in-law's footman loitering about in the Long hall.

"What are you doing here?" I asked. I noted as I spoke that he was not in livery, and I was instantly alarmed.

"Her ladyship's maid sent me down to look for a book her ladyship had left here, sir," he said civilly.

My suspicions were rather roused than allayed by the precision with which he spoke.

"Her ladyship has not been sitting in the hall," I said still sharply; "if there is a book at all, you will find it in the Spanish room."

Which was right at the end, and looked out on the front drive.

"Thank you, sir," he said with disarming politeness which did not disarm me in the least, and disappeared in the direction indicated.

I went into the Arabic room, leaving the door ajar, and a few minutes later saw the footman pass swiftly and silently by and scale the steps into the Marble hall. Now the staircase to my sister-in-law's room was in the first

hall by the front door. I rushed to the speaking-tube which communicates with Williams's room in the offices, and whistled up that reliable domestic.

"Williams," I shouted, "that rascally footman of Lady Frances's is up to some mischief. Keep an eye on him, will you?"

"Very good, sir," responded the faithful one's voice down the tube. "I will speak to 'Enery" (one of my own six-footers),

Soon after this the Abercrombies arrived, and my small house party assembled, and duly went in to dinner in the banqueting hall, which, as I think I explained before, forms one of the wings on the far side of the Marble hall. I never used to send the Emperor in to dinner with any one, as he did not understand the ceremony and was inclined to despise it, but I always made him head the procession. I followed with Mrs. Abercrombie, and the rest of the rectory party sorted itself out partners from my guests, leaving Tralee and Lady Frances to bring up the rear. It here becomes necessary to explain that the banqueting hall, itself a very large room, though dwarfed by the Marble hall through which we first processed, is three steps down from the level of the latter, and is connected with the servants' offices by a subterranean passage which runs three parts round the house to my wing and also communicates with the crypt under the Marble hall, where all the cellars are. Through this passage door came Williams, followed by his subordinates bearing in the dinner, and paused behind my chair.

"'Enery can't find 'er ladyship's footman nowhere, sir," he breathed to the parting on the top of my head; "I think 'e must 'ave gone hout."

"Well, keep a look-out after dinner then," I returned. Williams was an excellent servant, but an indifferent

policeman, and his ideas of keeping a look-out nearly involved us in serious disaster.

Dinner was over, and the ladies were leaving us ; I went up the steps and opened the door for them into the Marble hall, Lady Frances leading the way, Mrs. Abercrombie's daughter circling round her maternal relative like a young lamb round an old sheep, Violet last, throwing some repartee over her shoulder at Tralee. At the same time, Wu-Chow, whose custom it was to walk about the Marble hall in the evening like a very substantial old ghost, appeared in the doorway of the saloon, at right angles to the one in which we stood, waiting for Violet. I was just shouting a greeting to him, when that suspicious character, the footman, started out of the shadow to my right and deliberately fired at the old mandarin. The confusing echoes of the vast hall were startled by the shot, by four female screams, and by an awful yell from Wu-Chow, as he dropped prone on the pavement. The footman dashed back into the open door of the subterranean passage, Tralee, Pilkington, and the rector came raving up from the banqueting hall, and we all four darted on his track.

As he sprang down the uncarpeted steps into the stone passage, he hurled something in his hand at the big electric light which lighted it up, smashing the glass and plunging us into utter darkness. Up and down the echoing passage we raved like human bloodhounds, and from the servants' end Willianis and his underlings joined in, shouting at the tops of their voices. I yelled to one of them to go and guard the door to the crypt, and plunged on, confident that I knew the windings of the passage better than any spy, however closely he might have explored in twenty-four hours. I was so close to the man that I knew, even if he fled all round the passage, I must be upon him when he paused to open the door at the far end. I ran at my

best pace, with the others shouting like lunatics at varying distances behind me, till I was suddenly brought up in the darkness, by crashing against the bolted door into my wing. Then the man had escaped me after all.

In the first moment, I cursed freely. The next, I reflected that the man could not possibly have reached the door, and I remembered a large alcove in the wall half-way down the passage. The spy was sharper than I thought.

"Go back, don't come any farther, all of you!" I yelled.
"Keep a look-out, we'll catch him yet."

I coasted down the passage with my hand against the right wall. Before me, I heard the others retreating with much uproar—the servants making the most. Half-way round, the wall failed under my hand.

"I see you, you blackguard!" I shouted.

A flash, a report, and a bullet whistled harmlessly past me.

"Bad shot!" I shouted, and called up the others by name. At the sound of their clamorous approach in the treacherous dark, the man's nerve failed him; he obviously determined that his last shot should have its effect. The darkness illuminated suddenly, and the second report was followed by the sound of a heavy body falling on the stones.

CHAPTER XXIII

SUNG-CHING SHUFFLES THE CARDS

My hand shook as I struck a match to light up the scene of this latest disaster. As the flame flared out, spitting into the thick underground darkness of the passage, monstrous shadows danced on the wall, and the footsteps of the others echoed along the flags as they came up. It was a grim and uncanny scene enough, under the multiplying arches of the stone passage, lighted only by my quivering lucifer, a small halo in the unholy darkness that seemed to magnify sights and sounds alike. Half in, half out of the inky gloom, lay the figure of the footman, huddled up as he fell ; I left it to the others to lift and turn him over. The light danced on their faces as they bent gravely over him. Pilkington shook his head, and the shadow of it shot up to the vaulted roof and down again ; the few words in which he pronounced the man's epitaph rang among the arches knell-like. Tralee walked off to pacify the frightened ladies, who had taken refuge in the Long hall, where they ran together like so many sheep. I, after giving some orders as to the disposal of the footman's body, accompanied Pilkington to examine Wu-Chow, and found the old gentleman not seriously hurt but almost insane with terror. We handed him over to the faithful Kwa-Yen, and turned our attention to the Emperor, who, however, had relapsed into a phlegmatic Oriental fatalism.

"They will kill me at last, Louis," he said stolidly, "and all your pains will be of no use. I was born for this end, and it is the will of Heaven."

He irritated me nearly as much as the rector, who felt it incumbent on him to make some sacerdotal remark, and accordingly said solemnly:

"In the midst of life, we are in death."

"Yes, but such deuced unnecessary death," I retorted.

I felt this even more emphatically a few days later, when the unfortunate old Wu-Chow, after lingering in a speechless state of semi-imbecility, succumbed to the mere nervous shock of the occurrence.

"Died of pure chicken-heartedness," said the unmerciful doctor; "and a thoroughly good riddance of rotten bad rubbish!"

"You're a cold-blooded brute, Samuel," I responded; "this is what comes of fiddling all your days with drugs and lancets."

Which, when I come to think of it, was an unfounded charge, considering how little Pilkington practised his noble profession.

As with the keeper, so with the footman. Nothing transpired at the inquest, nothing incriminating was found on his person, and nothing was revealed by the researches of detectives among the byways of his past. The only thing which appeared in any way certain, was that he was an instrument of the dark power which struck through the Cathayan Embassy (though even this could not be proved, so well did they know how to choose their tools), and that he had been misled by Wu-Chow's Celestial attire and by imperfect information into taking the mandarin for his sovereign.

We buried Wu-Chow in a quiet corner of the park, and squared our shoulders to bear a fresh weight of publicity.

Lady Frances retired in considerable disorder, and declared that until I dismissed "that yellow man," and converted my domicile into "once more a possible house to stay at," she should cease to honour me with her visits; and I sped the parting guest with a most cheerful fortitude, though I was sorry to lose Violet. Fortunately, however, the presence of the Blessed Damozel and Cuckoo in' the Halkin Street house was incompatible with that of Giles, so as the London season and warm weather were coming on, the younger scions of the family. were left to console me in my exile and disgrace. Meanwhile, there was a fresh outbreak of all the unpleasant social and newspaper symptoms that had marked the sensational ending of the keeper episode, and I gave both the public press and my private correspondence a wide berth for many days. I had done well to avoid both, but especially the latter, permanently.

About a fortnight after the inquest, my valet, as his custom was, came to my room in the morning with coffee and my letters. After depositing the tray which held the former on my bed, he remarked :

"There's a parcel for you, sir ; shall I bring it in ? "

"Yes," I said, rousing myself from the aftermath of a dream about Esmée.

"It's rather heavy, sir," he resumed, as he bore it through the door.

"Then don't put it down on my bed," I commanded, "or you'll upset the coffee. Put it on the writing-table and open it."

"Very good, sir."

His back was turned to me as he obeyed my directions, and I did not see the minutiae of his actions. All I know of was the sudden loud explosion which made me start till the bed rocked and the coffee-pot fell with a crash,

leaving dark streams to burst riotously over the counterpane. I rang the bell at my bedhead violently before I rose to investigate matters, and I would rather not describe the condition in which I found my unfortunate valet. This was the third death and the third inquest within a month, and all because of Chin-Wang's presence in my house. We afterwards discovered that the infernal machine was directed to his Majesty, care of me, an address my valet had overlooked to his undoing. I redoubled my precautions; increased the army of detectives round the house, and submitted everything that came therein to a rigorous examination, often to a few hours' immersion in a bucket of water. The servants complained that they were living in a state of siege, and were "that put about at being so interfered with" that I had to double their wages to keep them in my service, as I knew that to import a fresh batch would be fatal. I gave in to them thus because it suited my own purposes, promising myself to dismiss them all with contumely (except Williams), if ever the Emperor came to his own again; and they became extremely uppish, and presumed upon the indulgence, for servants are a short-sighted and unreasoning race.

My new vigilance seemed to attain its object, for the summer rolled along and no fresh attempt was made to exterminate my imperial inmate. The passivity of our mysterious enemies did not, however, reassure me; I knew that these long-headed Orientals would bide their time, and not spoil their *coup* by over-impatience and hastiness. As time passed, both Pilkington and I began to show decided signs of the wear and tear of the unrelaxed watchfulness; Samuel became as grey as a badger, and I lost weight and increased in irascibility daily. The constant feeling of unsafeness kept our nerves on the strain, and the hemmed-in life played old Harry with our digestions

and tempers. I began to understand why the Czars of Russia, with a perpetual dread of assassination hanging over their heads, not uncommonly went mad, and almost always became ungovernably ferocious and suspicious. I never was very confiding at best of times, but what little belief I still had in my fellow-creatures was getting ruthlessly demolished ; the least thing would have started me keeping a watch on Pilkington himself.

Meanwhile, all this suspense and nerve-strain and "cramped-upness," which was visibly ageing and embittering Pilkington and me, seemed to affect the Emperor wonderfully little. Probably he felt few of our mental troubles, and was accustomed to a limited outlook on the world ; at all events, as our spirits declined, his grew daily more and more cheerful. He spent the long summer days peacefully fishing in the Blatch, with Pilkington smoking a very foul pipe by his side, and spasmodically catching butterflies and dragonflies, or digging up botanical specimens with a blunt knife, or swearing at the gnats, of which there were always an abundance on the river to provide food for profane remarks ; while I inveigled the wily trout higher up or lower down, as the case might be. We lunched in the open air off hard-boiled eggs and lettuce and *pâte-de-foie-gras* in tins, and lay about under the trees arguing about things which concerned us not. Pilkington laid down the law on every topic under the sun or above the moon ; I contradicted him and irritated his didactical mind with frivolities ; and the Emperor, as he improved in understanding and command of English, began to take an amazingly prominent part in the conversation, and always treated us to new views of every subject.

In the cool of the evening, when the shadows began to lengthen on the grass and the sky to darken with homing rooks, the Emperor and I would ride polo-ponies aimlessly

about the park, and learn, if we did not know it already, every inch of the ground. From this exercise Pilkington, who abhors everything in the nature of a horse, excused himself. He preferred to wander about leading Cuckoo's Shetland pony, which never went out of a walk, and sympathising with Cuckoo's reluctance to bestride this fiery steed ; I fancy he even carried his sympathy to the length of allowing Cuckoo to dismount and perform most of his so-called ride on foot. The Blessed Damozel, however, rode with us, and was immensely proud of the promotion ; the grey mare was decidedly the better horse in the Clifford family, as far as enterprise went.

After dinner, the Emperor always insisted on playing billiards far into the night ; he was very abstemious about sleep himself, and never seemed to fancy Pilkington or I could require any. As it was now our custom never to leave him alone, the small hours of the morning often found us wandering round the billiard-table yawning and making villainous shots. His Majesty was decidedly autocratic about small things, though in greater ones he would soon yield to pressure. If told a thing was etiquette, he would do it without a murmur, however extravagant it seemed ; etiquette was to him above all questioning. It, however, soon became impossible to regulate all his conduct in this way, for he had an unerring memory and could always floor me by exclaiming that I had not told him some certain course of action was etiquette before, or that something quite the reverse came under this revered head. He rapidly got the daily routine by heart, and so little happened that was out of the common that my etiquette strategy eventually became a dead letter.

"We're spoiling the little beggar for Cambaluc," Pilkington remarked one day, when the Emperor, in the

course of an argument, had been more than ordinarily modern and progressive in his remarks.

But Cambaluc was gradually becoming a far-off dream, even to the Son of Heaven himself. The sound of the Mongol tongue faded on his ears as the traditions of his people in his mind. Not that this in the least affected his spirits. He fished, rode, and played billiards contentedly, and between whiles romped with the children, who loved him, told them strange and wonderful stories of a sort they had never heard before, and even sang them songs in a high nasal voice that drove me, though I am not particularly musical, to desperation. So he passed his time happily, till one day something happened to recall his lost empire and to rouse in him that worst of sicknesses, *le mal du pays*.

It was the day Esmée first came to Blatchford. There had been peace in the land for nearly three months, when Esmée came down to stay at a place called Danescourt, eight miles distant, belonging to Crichton, our member. It seemed to me a curious coincidence that it was the third time in the year that she had come to stay at a place in the neighbourhood. I took a day off duty to go over to see her and propose that she and the Crichtons should ride one day to Blatchford. There were pleasant grass lanes all the way, and they came one fine morning, escorted by Crichton, whom Samuel scorned from the first moment of setting eyes on him and spoke of afterwards as a blot on the legislature; hard measure, for Crichton is a heavy man but amiable. I left Pilkington to lionise the Emperor to Mrs. Crichton, who is rather a silly woman, and devoted myself to the pleasant duty of walking about with Esmée.

Pleasant I call it. A very qualified term nevertheless. A man wounded by a paralysing bullet may lie all day in

the sun with a water-bottle just beyond his reach. A man half mad with starvation may look through a baker's window with only a pane of glass between him and satiety. A pauper may see a millionaire dash a careless signature on a cheque that would mean ease and peace of mind all his days. Tantalus wallowed in hell with apples, presumably his favourite fruit, dangling over his head. Moses gazed off Nebo at a land flowing with nasty things like milk and honey, but which to his soul was Promised. Midas sat lonely in a wilderness of gold, his own child, the apple of his eye, a senseless statue before him. And I wandered at Esmée's side through the summer daylight heavy-hearted, by reason of all that I had to give and might not. Surely in this domain of mine there was all that the heart of woman can desire? Does she want Paris frocks? let her order them by cartloads. Does she want diamonds, or pigeon's blood rubies, or emeralds from the shrines of Eastern idols, or pearls from the deepest of deep seas? every jewel-merchant in Bond Street and the Rue de la Paix waits only for her word. Does she want gold, just for the feel and the chink of it, crisp notes to crackle in her white fingers, fat cheque-books to tear leaf from leaf like artichokes? Does she want horses, carriages, a great house to riot in at her sweet will, gardens to grow her the flowers that she loves all the year round, wildernesses to play with, dependents to act the Lady Bountiful to? Women sell themselves every day for no more than all this. It Esmée could have had and much more, if devotion counts for anything, and I was in such an *impasse* that I could not give it her. (The sister dilemma is one on the horns of which I have also found myself much earlier in my career; when I would have given the girl everything and been sure of her acceptance thereof, and had not then, by the skilful practical joking of Fate,

got everything, or even anything to give her. She married one of my chiefs, and is an ambassadress now.)

All the time, Esmée smiled and smiled and was an angel, and I suppose I retained some vestiges of outward civilisation; but inwardly I was ripe for manslaughter. It was only Giles that stood in my path. I could almost have forgiven it if it had been some one in the semblance of a man—Tralee, who was a magnificent animal, or Pilkington, who had brains and abilities far transcending the average, or, almost, even the Emperor, who at least had the glamour of the centuries and the prestige of majesty behind him. But Giles! Giles!

Somewhere about six o'clock in the evening, Mrs. Crichton, getting bored, I suppose, with the very little she could make of the Emperor (indeed, he would not have come out of his shell at all, had it not been to see Esmée), suggested that they must start on their ride back, and the Emperor, the Blessed Damozel, and I prepared to accompany them as far as the park gates. Before we started, there was some joke about a stirrup-cup of green chartreuse, which Esmée called her "one vice," but firmly refused to give way to in broad daylight, though we reminded her of the sagacious old lady's dictum, that the only way to deal with temptation was to yield to it at once, and put it out of the way of further trouble. I remember this trivial incident, because of some vaguely poetical, or pictorial, idea which floated in my mind, of the Rhine maiden with the flame-coloured hair floating through the green Rhine waters; and I would have spoken of it, and made some allusion to the appropriate chance of my yacht being called *Flosshilde*, only I could not formulate it on my tongue, and was assailed by the bizarre thought that Pilkington and the Crichtons would probably hold up hands of holy horror at a vision of Esmée dis-

porting herself dishevelled, amid seas of green chartreuse. And no wonder.

We rode across the park, over one of the stone bridges of the Blatch, from which I pointed out to Esmée the scene of the keeper disaster. There was something curiously old-fashioned about Esmée on a horse; something which made you think that if she came out dressed like a picture, in a flowing skirt and a hat with a drooping feather, she would not look amiss—in fact, less so than in the severely cut garments of to-day. Lighting off the bridge on a wide stretch of grass, we cantered merrily to the most easterly of the lodge-gates, and there pulled up, for the Emperor and I had reached the limit of our kingdom. All we could do was to look through the bars of the high, spiked gate, and respond to the ladies' waved handkerchiefs; gradually they disappeared round a bend in the high road, and I became aware of an odd-looking personage talking to the lodge-keeper some paces away from the gate on the roadside. I had scarcely wrenched my attention from Esmée and directed it to this figure, when it vanished into the lodge, and the lodge-keeper hastened up to me with a note. Then I looked at the Emperor, and saw his immobile face convulsed with an unusual excitement.

"It is Sung-Ching!" he ejaculated; "it is Sung-Ching!"

"Keep away!" I yelled.

But the Emperor paid no heed. He had slipped from his saddle, and was through the gate and into the lodge before the lodge-keeper could recover from his astonishment at the pony's reins being suddenly thrust into his hand.

I thought all was lost. A wild notion crossed my mind of shouting to the vanished Crichton, who was a powerful man, as I flung myself off my pony and dashed

into the lodge like a maniac. I was brought up short at the door by the spectacle within.

By a table covered with oilcloth, the Emperor, enveloped as with incense, in the "shut-up parlour" aroma which pervades poor dwellings, stood tall and slim in his white cords and brown riding boots (he hung a good boot), and at his feet, on the clean, but far from gorgeous floor, was my mystery-loving acquaintance of Stanhope Gate, the brother, *soi-disant*, of Sung-Taou, that progressive and modern personage, grovelling on his face as he might in the very inmost courts of the imperial Palace at Cambaluc.

"What the——" I began. But the Emperor was speaking in his own Tartar, the language of his childhood and of his ruling race, that he had nigh forgotten of late.

"Sung-Ching, Sung-Ching, thou hast come to me from the Dead One?"

And Sung-Ching, from the level of the imperial boots, answered:

"I come, Great Dragon, but from the living, not from the dead."

"Do they call me back to Cambaluc?" The imperial voice sounded a note of eagerness which I scarcely expected, so had he grown into his new life.

"Not yet, Great Dragon. Have patience, O Succession of Glory, and when the time is ripe the faithful among your children will yet lay the kingdom at your divine feet."

Polished brown leather was hardly adding to the divinity of the Emperor's feet just then, and amid all my suspicious alarm the grotesque thought crossed me. At my elbow, the Blessed Damozel, who had of course come to see the fun, stared wide-eyed, and finally whispered,—

"Is that Gibberish, Uncle Louis? the language of the

gipsies and the fairies, you know. And how can anybody talk Gibberish so fastly?"

"Run away, Damozel, this is no place for you," I said severely; but the Damozel did not intend to miss a historic interview and stayed where she was. "I wish to know," I added, taking a step forward, "what that gentleman," pointing unmistakably at Sung-Ching, "is doing here?"

Sung-Ching promptly sat back on his heels and spoke his idiomatic English.

"I have come to do homage to my sovereign and to—see the country," he asserted.

"Little reason, Mr. Sung-Ching," I replied sombrely, "have either his Celestial Majesty or I to believe in men of your colour. Have a care! I am armed."

"I have no fear of you and your weapon," returned Sung-Ching composedly; "the Great Pure One knows me and that is enough. Who are you?"

"This is my friend," said the Emperor, laying his hand on my arm, "and, Louis, this is my faithful subject."

"The Son of Heaven speaks, and he cannot be doubted or gainsaid," added Sung-Ching. But I did not like the look of him all the same.

"I apologise," I said. "If Mr. Sung-Ching is what he represents himself to be, he will understand and excuse my anxiety on his Majesty's behalf."

Sung-Ching bowed very low, becoming again [the obsequious Celestial.

"I have met you before, excellency," I resumed, keeping a look-out as I spoke for any signs of treachery.

"And you will meet me again," prophesied Sung-Ching cheerfully.

"You are a faithful subject of his Majesty, and in a responsible position, and yet you could not prevent the

atrocious attempts that have been made on his life," said I, in a tone which showed pretty plainly what I thought of his pretensions.

"I have been in Cathay," he said meekly, "and have returned. But to-day," he added without changing the key of his voice, "I learn that there is a purpose of breaking down the walls of your domain in many places, that men may enter by stealth under cover of night. Keep a watch, Mr. Randolph, keep a watch, stricter than you have ever kept before."

"They may break down the walls all over the place," I remarked; "but they will have some difficulty in cutting the cordon of my night watchmen, and the walls themselves are pretty sound."

"There is dynamite, Mr. Randolph," hinted Sung-Ching.

"Yes, but the sound of a big explosion would most effectively bring my people together."

"True, true, but in the confusion, you understand; and a Celestial can wriggle through the darkness like a snake." As he spoke, Sung-Ching's little eyes glinted. He'd done some of that wriggling business himself, I'll be bound. "Before, your own countrymen were used against you, but now is time for change."

"I wonder they haven't tried it before," I remarked, more to myself than to him; "only, of course, a dead Celestial lying about would be incriminating."

"But this time the plot was not to fail," observed our informer suavely, "only that there was one Sung-Ching that came down to kow-tow to the Son of Heaven and to tell what he heard in the secret councils of the Ambassador."

"Um—m," I said. It struck me he was running with the hare and hunting with the hounds, after the crooked Oriental custom.

"This is all my business," he remarked abruptly.

We moved out of the frowsy cottage into the fading sunlight; one of the many detectives always about the premises was peaceably holding my pony and the Blessed Damozel's. Sung-Ching paused in the dark doorway, and I kept the tail of my eye on him. The Emperor looked at his pony, and then at his subject, and turned round impulsively, his hand almost on the reins.

"Sung-Ching, Sung-Ching, I shall see Cambaluc again? My people would have me sacrifice for them once more?"

"In Heaven's time, Great Dragon, you shall rule all within the four seas," said the smooth voice. But I caught his eye, and saw for a moment the real man. He wished this thing and did not believe it possible. I was impelled to a tardy hospitality, but no persuasion would detain him; he would not so much as tell how he came, and insisted on departing inscrutably. The man loved mystery.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE LOVES OF "DON QUIXOTE"

Now the deposed Emperor of Cathay, among many other failings, had a child-like, but not bland, weakness for Turkish delight and such cloying matter, and strained my credit alarmingly at Fuller's in Regent Street, as soon as he discovered that he could order down what he desired on "tick." The taste increased his popularity, already at a high ebb, with the children, and their favourable opinion of him improved by leaps and bounds ; they thought that in this matter he decidedly displayed more intelligence even than the omniscient "Uncle Louis."

"Any more sweets, Majesty-Emperor?" was their almost diurnal inquiry, till I at last was obliged to suggest that his Majesty should order the said dainties in sufficiently large quantities to last several days at a time.

"Here are sweets in the letter post I did not order," he remarked one day ; "this is a curious thing."

"Where did they come from?" I asked.

"That is what I do not know, Louis ; there is no message therewith."

"Probably Violet sent them," I suggested ; "let me look at the direction, sire."

The first thing that I noticed was that the packet had been sent from the Sloane Street post-office, which, of course, was the nearest to Violet's home ; but the writing

of the direction, small, crabbed and outlandish, roused my suspicions.

"Is it the honourable daughter of your brother?" asked the Emperor, with his usual ceremonious circumlocution.

"Have you tasted these bonbons, sire?" was my counter query.

To my relief, he answered in the negative, and I turned to the doctor.

"I wish you'd look at them, Samuel. I don't like the idea of them at all."

"Do you think they're poisoned? Miss Violet surely—" began Pilkington.

"Violet's got nothing to do with it, man alive! that's not her hand. And," examining it again more closely, "I believe I've seen it before. Yes, by Gad, I have! Does your Majesty remember the note I got one night at the theatre? Now I'll swear there's some hanky-panky about those sweets."

"They've got a queer smell," said the imaginative Pilkington, introducing his nose into the box; "I'll take them and test them. Nice people, your Majesty's subjects! I suppose it's by the merest luck you have not tasted their pretty presents?"

"Now, Damozel," I said, turning to my great-niece, "remember for the future never to eat anything until Doctor Pilkington's passed it sound."

"Yes, Uncle Louis," she returned; "but suppose Doctor Pilkington isn't there?"

"Well, anybody with his learning, wisdom, and experience will do equally well. But perhaps I had better say: Find out where what you're going to eat comes from before you eat it, and if it comes from the Cathayan Embassy, don't eat it."

"Are the Ca'yanumbsy foods poison, Uncle Louis?"

"That is what Doctor Pilkington is going to find out for certain I have no two opinions myself."

"Poison is deadly nightshade. It grows in the garden," observed the Blessed Damozel instructively.

"Cram-full of arsenic," remarked Pilkington, returning ; "one of 'em is enough to kill ten men."

"Mongolians proverbially have nine lives, which perhaps accounts for the strength of the dose," remarked I.

"His Majesty must already have lost one or two. But I call it weak strategy on the part of our friends," continued Samuel, "because they must have known we should never allow him to touch the beastliness."

"Perhaps they relied on his swallowing a few before mentioning it," I suggested ; "bless their dear designing souls ! I'll have every letter, parcel, or package that comes into this house vetted before it's opened, for the future."

I had made this regulation already once ; but it was very hard to get the household staff to stick to my rules. Nothing but experience will teach some people, especially the uneducated, and I became convinced that, until the Emperor was dead, my menials would never grasp the mortal necessity for caution. These people had plenty of intelligence of a kind, too, but such an infernally crooked way of applying it. However, my orders were so far attended to, that for a long time there was no further open attempt against us ; our correspondence was innocuous, and no weapon was pointed at the Emperor in the light of day. Through the detectives, however, I from time to time heard of secret, untraceable attempts to tamper with my servants, and the strain of expecting and combating these wore Pilkington and me to shreds of our former selves. There was no day or hour when we were not on the watch for some unknown treachery.

It was impossible to foresee the next move of these tor-tuous Orientals, and the Emperor was of no assistance to us.

"Why plan so much, Louis?" he demanded. "Sung-Ching will warn us if anything is wrong."

But I had not the same faith in Sung-Ching that he had.

At the end of August, Pilkington discovered that he could not lead this life any longer without going mad; and he betook himself to the Dolomites. Tralee was in Scotland, and letters sent to Fiennes' London address remained unanswered, so I resigned myself to a lonely vigil over the Emperor's welfare. We passed a week in absolute peace, nothing stirring within, and no word from the outer world coming to break our monotony ; Chin-Wang throve apace ; but I, used to a life of change and movement, sounded all the depths and shoals of boredom. Then one day the whole face of things altered by an electric flash.

The censorship I exercised over all postal communications very nearly resulted in our having none at all, especially as my disappearance from their constant view conduced to my friends forgetting my existence. It is the easiest thing in the world to drop out of a circle ; cease to seek out anybody, and ten to one they will never take the trouble to ask what has become of you, far less come in person to find out--unless you are one from whom much is to be obtained. Friendship--of a kind, the kind that generally obtains in this world--is, after all, like everything else, purchasable ; if you desire to be loved and admired, or even remembered, you must jog the weak memories of your friends by feeding their insatiate bodies and fixing their wandering minds with gifts and entertainments. If you think the joy of associating with persons, with whose aspects you have been familiar for years, and who would probably, on the strength of this circumstance,

describe themselves as your friends, is worth all the expenditure of time, thought, money, and writing-paper necessary to rivet their attention and secure their always quite tepid regard, you will spend an anxious life in keeping yourself either in the flesh or on paper before their eyes. If you do not so think, you will speedily find the said eyes turned on somebody else who can be more readily exploited. "Nothing for nothing." Not half a bad motto. Only you usually find, in this world that it is all give on your side and all take on the other, or else, through your wisdom, or niggardliness, or cussedness, no exchange takes place at all.

To return to our postal intercourse with the outside world. For weeks it had resolved itself into bills and telegrams alone, till one day at the end of August, after Pilkington had arrived among his mountains, I received one of the latter communications, which put a different complexion on my affairs in general.

"Am in trouble. If you could come to my assistance at once, should be deeply grateful. Am at 111, Portman Square, and would send to meet midday train to-day.

"ESMÉE SIDNEY."

This was the message which sprang to my astonished vision that August morning; I turned the thin pink paper backwards and forwards in blank amaze. Surely it was for Giles that it was intended? But it was most unmistakably addressed to me. Then joy and satisfaction began stealthily to overlap my astonishment. Was it not significant that it was to me that she turned in trouble? Would she send me this impetuous summons if I were not—at least occasionally—in her thoughts? I troubled myself little over the cause of her distress, such is human

nature and the self-absorption thereof. I could easily help her out of it, I thought ; I had been living so long in the middle of brain-racking suspense, and imminent danger that I felt quite inured to problems and entirely capable of coping with any likely to be so insignificant compared with the life and safety of the Son of Heaven. I telegraphed to the station-master of our wayside station to stop the mid-day express for me—a course of procedure we often adopted—and told the Emperor to expect me back at nightfall. I did not tell him where or why I was going, and he never asked, for he was not in the least inquisitive.

"Take care of his Majesty, Damozel," I said to my small hostess, "and be sure to amuse him and not to be a nuisance."

"They are no nuisance," hastily said the Emperor ; "we will ride in the park and be happy."

"You shall tell us stories," added the Blessed Damozel authoritatively.

"Tell me 'tories now," put in Cuckoo, hurling himself from space into the Emperor's arms.

That sovereign settled himself down readily to this congenial employment.

"What shall it then be?" he began. "Shall it be the story of Ai-Sin-Ghow, the Golden Stem, my ancestor, and of the Magic Maidens and the Magpie? or of Tsang-Kee', who made letters from the marks on the back of a tortoise? or of Sung-Jin-She, the Fire-producer? or some other?"

While the Blessed Damozel and Cuckoo made selections from this storehouse of legendary lore, I slipped away to catch my train. I was half way to London before it occurred to me that I would have been wiser to telegraph and tell Esmée that she had not summoned me in vain ; this idea having insidiously encroached upon my mind, worried

me severely till I remembered that I had her address and should therefore be with her at the time when she evidently expected me. She relied upon and believed in me, and I blessed her for it ; never should she find her trust and faith misplaced. No knight errant of old ever set forth on the quest of the Sangreal with a lighter heart than I upon this journey. My only hope was that my assistance was not being asked in any enterprise that would benefit Giles.

On arrival at the terminus, a footman in black livery came up to me touching his hat and inquiring : "Mr. Randolph, sir ?" and I found a neat brougham waiting at the kerbstone. There was no reason to loiter and in another minute we were bowling lightly through the streets at a very considerable speed. The streets were not crowded ; "nobody," by an euphuism, being in London—that is, only the four million odd who were unable to get away—and no policeman checked my Jehu-like charioteer. We whirled along in an encircling cloud of dust, and the languid hansoms and heavy carts made way for us. We looked probably like a doctor hastening to a very urgent case. We had gone the length of one street when it struck me that there was a strange heavy sickly smell in the brougham which was altogether unpleasant. I suddenly felt overpoweringly sleepy ; I tried to open each of the windows in turn, but all stuck, and every moment the closeness of the atmosphere seemed to gain in strides on my brain ; I thumped on the glass to attract the footman's attention, but he turned a deaf ear. Then a rush of drowsiness came over me, and I remember sinking back in the brougham.

When I awoke, I was apparently lying on the floor, or at any rate on something suspiciously hard, in pitch darkness ; I had a bad headache and felt so dazed and idiotic that I

neither moved nor tried to arrange my thoughts for several minutes. Then I heard some cat-footed creature moving about the room, and a door opened near my head. Lights flashed in my face, and the vague outlines of a room became visible to me; I shut my dazzled eyes and heard the velvety footsteps creeping round me. Then a hand was laid on my wrist; I opened my eyes with a jerk on the malign face of a Celestial.

With a yell, I was on my feet in an instant, hurling the Cathayan who was bending over me into space. But the room was ful of the fiends; they hemmed me in on every side, their lean hands checked my frantic dash at the open door, they guarded the passage without. I wrenched myself out of their clutches, knocked two of them down and drove a third up against the doorpost, and was altogether preparing to render a very good account of them, when a fresh relay poured in at the door and the remainder recovered from their surprise at my sudden resurrection. I flatter myself several of them emerged with their countenances considerably more hideous than God had already made them from the fray, which of course ended in my discomfiture. I must admit that they did not attempt to reward violence with violence, but they were a dozen to one and had handcuffs ready. Powerless, I took refuge in my resourceful vocabulary. I adjured them in English, and Cathayan, and Tartar; and I was only met by insane Mongolian grins. I told them to be careful what they did, as I was a great mandarin and my nearest relations were all "Tsung-Tu" and "Chiang-Chun," and that if I was missing, the Great Old Fathers of the Tsung-Li-Yamen would demand the utmost penalty of the law at the hands of the Cathayan Ambassador; and when this had no effect, I cursed them solidly and categorically. I expressed insulting opinions of their immediate progenitors and

hopes that the menus of those persons might include much that was unsavoury. I consigned the sepulchres of their ancestors to desecration and their souls to the bodies of degraded insects. I prophesied for everybody in the room and for all their relations appalling fates, most of which I averred that I would be personally instrumental in bringing about. I poured obloquy on their race and all its institutions ; and the sulphurous nature of my remarks finally drove them bodily from the room. They were careful, however, to lock the door, and when I endeavoured to burst through the panels as an acrobat at a circus through a paper hoop, I found that its lock and hinges were strong enough to resist my weight.

Left to myself, I examined the room inch by inch by the light of the lamp they had left me. There was one long window with a sliding shutter arrangement, but when I forced this back into its groove, I discovered that there was another pair of shutters outside the glass which was obviously fastened out of reach. It was, moreover of iron, and did not give at all to shakings and pushings. There was no heavy furniture to convert into an impromptu battering ram ; in fact, the room was sparsely furnished with a low light camp bedstead, a small table, and one wicker chair. There was no means of escape ; I was most securely trapped.

I sat down and comprehensively cursed my own folly, not for the first time. Of a surety I should make a most inferior detective ; here was I lured as easily as a silly bird into the snare of the fowler. Yet only the devilish ingenuity of these infernal Celestials could have discovered the importance of Esmée in my scheme of existence ; and, by the way, how under the sun, moon, and stars had they discovered it ? Of course there was some fresh plot on foot. Pilkington was known to be absent, and I had

to be got out of the way. Then—well, I knew I need not expect to see Chin-Wang alive again. My hand-to-hand struggle with the entire resources of the Cathayan Empire for the imperial life was over; the game was up, and the weaker and, I may be allowed to say, pluckier player had got the worst of it. I was long past feeling that my personal vanity was engaged; I merely experienced regret for his Majesty and resignation to the inevitable.

One is always selfish, and the thing that most troubled me was that after all the telegram was not genuine. Esmée never sent it; she had not called for me in her need; she did not believe in me, she did not . . . The air castles I had built that morning came tumbling about my ears. Doubtless I was as great a fool to have built them as to have trusted the Emperor's life and my own credit on a piece of pink paper. But the reflection comforted me just about as much as it generally does.

CHAPTER XXV

THE EMPEROR'S INITIATIVE

I LEARNT afterwards that Chin-Wang, left to himself while the hours passed and I did not return, remained fairly placid till evening. Then he became restive, and as night came on and he had to go without his customary game of five hundred up, thoroughly annoyed rather than alarmed. Being no great sleeper at any time, he stayed up, spinning little teetotums of the Blessed Damozel's on the billiard table and otherwise amusing himself in innocent but somewhat childish ways, till all the household had gone to bed, when the emptiness and solemn echoes of the great sleeping house forced themselves upon his notice, and inspired him with vague child-like alarm. He took refuge in my bedroom, where he took down an old match-lock that hung on the wall, and sat nursing it till day broke. There was either some miscalculation in the tactics of the enemy, or Sung-Ching had been secretly at work, for that night, the most favourable opportunity of all, no attempt was made. Towards morning, the Emperor fell asleep, and woke up in a more philosophical frame of mind; but as the next day wore along and there were still no signs of me, he became uneasy again and sought support in the wisdom of the Blessed Damozel.

"I do not know where Louis is, and I do not like it

much. I think he should come back," he announced abruptly, coming into the children's day nursery.

"Uncle Louis gone?" echoed the Blessed Damozel. "Oh, but he'll come back soon, won't he?"

"That is what I would wish to know. I do not like it. Louis should not go for so long; the night is now over and it is high day and he does not come," said the Emperor fretfully.

"Uncle Louis gone to Londontown to fetch me goodies," suggested Cuckoo, who fancied all actions, human or divine, must revolve with his personality as an axis.

"I do not think it," returned the matter-of-fact potentate. "I more think something has befallen him of evilness."

The Blessed Damozel was very quick. She instantly caught the infection of his uneasiness.

"Oh, Majesty-Emperor," she exclaimed, clasping her hands, "do you think Uncle Louis is *lost*?"

"Yes," returned Chin-Wang, frowning, "I think enemies detain him."

"Oh, nobody would dare be so wicked as to be an enemy of Uncle Louis's!" ejaculated the Blessed Damozel.

"Uncle Louis shoot enemies bang down dead," asserted Cuckoo, strong in a certainty of "Uncle Louis's" omnipotence, and returned contentedly to a wooden horse and cart on the floor. The Blessed Damozel, however, was genuinely disturbed; she stood in front of the Emperor with a very distressed little face, and looked up at him appealingly.

"You don't think they—they would *hurt* Uncle Louis, do you, Majesty-Emperor?" she asked rather shakily.

"Perhaps not. They might rather come here when he is far and hurt me," said the Soh of Heaven apprehensively. "Louis is gone, and the Great Physician is gone, and so is Tia-Lee, and I feel not at all safe."

"Let's send for the policeman," the Blessed Damozel suggested.

"I think we might send for the Beautiful Red Lady," was the Emperor's opinion; "I should feel more glad if she was in the house, and it would not be so noisy."

He meant to refer to the echoes in the Marble hall, which had a most ghostly habit of wakening and bringing themselves prominently before one when one was alone.

"The lady who rode with us? Yes, we might write to her," doubtfully said the Blessed Damozel, who had a low opinion of her own sex. "Would she know where Uncle Louis is?"

"I think she loves Louis," opined Chin-Wang, "and she will find him even in the sea. The Beautiful Red Lady is very wise."

"Of course everybody loves Uncle Louis," asseverated the Blessed Damozel jealously; "I love him, but I don't know where he is."

"Perhaps he has told her, or is even now with her," said the Emperor, "for he loves her, I am sure, and where love leads all men run after and forget K'ung-Fu-Tze and his sayings. But he should have told me also."

"Shall we write and ask her?" demanded the Blessed Damozel, who took no interest in K'ung-Fu-Tze.

"Come to the Spanish room," suggested Chin-Wang, "the wheels of Coo-Coo's carriage make crying noises and I cannot listen to my own thought. We will get inks and pens, and tell the Beautiful Red Lady all our pains."

The Blessed Damozel was eagerly adopting this suggestion, when a Gorgon in the shape of a nurse swooped down upon her, and with the usual tantalising unseasonableness of nurses insisted that she should "change her frock before going downstairs, like a nice little lady."

"Oh, must I?" appealed the Blessed Damozel; "it will take years and years. Can't I come *now*, Majesty-Emperor?"

"Yes, yes," said Chin-Wang rather impatiently. "Let the little lady come," he added to the nurse; "the Son of Heaven will not wait for dresses and such foolishness."

"Please, your Majesty, 'er ladyship wouldn't like Miss Theodora to go down to the drawing-room in her cotton frock—"

"Oh yes, she would! Never mind the piggy old frock. I must go—tell her, tell her!" cried the Blessed Damozel, dancing round the Emperor.

"Please, your Majesty—"

"Do not speak to me, she-devil; fall on your face," said the Emperor fretfully. He was getting bored with this trivial and domestic discussion, and by this somewhat violent remark succeeded in clinching the matter at once. The Blessed Damozel pranced triumphantly in front of him, like David before the Ark, all the way to the Spanish room.

"Now we will write," said the Emperor, collecting all his materials and sitting down with the air of one about to cope with an international treaty. He took a firm grasp of the pen and sprawled over the table in a perfect fever of earnestness. The Blessed Damozel stood with one foot on a rung of his chair and the other waving in space, while she balanced herself by the back and by an outlying portion of the blotting-book; thus she had a bird's-eye view of the proceedings over the imperial shoulder.

"I am beginning," announced the Emperor, and paused to chew the end of his pen. "I know how I would begin if I wrote my own tongue," he continued meditatively, "but I do not know how to begin in yours."

"You begin: 'My dear 'somebody,'" dictated the Blessed

Damozel. "What is her name? I don't know her name."

"I think it is Sid-Nee," said the Emperor vaguely.

"Miss or Mrs.?" demanded the practical Miss Clifford.

"I will not begin so. I will say 'My dear Lady,'" said the Emperor.

"I don't think that's proper," said the Blessed Damozel disapprovingly. "Grandmamma's Lady Frances, but I don't think *that* lady was Lady Anything."

"But she is a lady," insisted the Emperor; "all white women are ladies, save the servant women. Louis says so. Even you will one day be a lady."

"I am one now," retorted the Blessed Damozel in her most dignified manner.

"I will begin in a different way," decided the Emperor finally, and started off writing at a great pace, while the Blessed Damozel read over his shoulder:

"In the last day of the eighth English month, in the twenty-fourth year—the twenty-fourth year of what, Majesty-Emperor?"

"Of my reign," returned Chin-Wang, without ceasing to struggle with the crooked characters he was producing. "—At the Pavilion of Blashfodd, I, the Golden One (Chin-We), write, my dear Lady."

Here he came to a dead stop.

"Say," prompted the Blessed Damozel, "'Uncle Louis is lost. Do you know where he is? Come and see us. And—and—I can't think of any more to say."

All this the Emperor took down in a most conscientious manner, and then seemed inspired on his own account.

"Now is one whole day that Louis is gone," he wrote, "and I see him not at all and I fear very evil enemies wish me to kill and no safety is who will help you honourable

Lady are all wise and seek him as once so to find him I am a deficient man and I know not what I will do.' ”

Here the Emperor's inspiration failed him. Punctuation not being his strong point (his spelling, which was all his own, is spared), his epistolary efforts had a breathless effect, and the Blessed Damozel lost herself in their intricacies.

“ I don't understand all that,” she remarked, “ and I don't believe the lady will. Say : ‘ Please, kind lady, find Uncle Louis for us. We are frightened because he has gone away. We don't know where he has gone away to. Cuckoo and me hopes you are quite well. Your loving little friend, Theodora Clifford.’ That's the way one writes a letter.”

The Emperor faithfully transcribed this down to the affectionate termination, when he stopped to argue.

“ It is I, not you, that write to the Beautiful Red Lady,” he remarked ; “ I must write my name, not yours.” So that the very remarkable and hybrid production was eventually signed : “ Your loving little friend, Chin-Wang, Ruler of the Yellow ” ; and to elevate its importance into that of a document the Emperor appended his signature over again in Cathayan characters.

“ Now you must address the envelope,” directed the Blessed Damozel. But this was easier said than done. Neither of them had any but the haziest idea of Esmée's name and address. They stared at each other in perplexity for some minutes, till the Emperor solved the difficulty.

“ Will-Yams will know,” he exclaimed ; and the Blessed Damozel, much relieved at the idea of consulting some responsible person, as even she did not so consider the Emperor, ran eagerly to the bell. Of course Williams was full of information. Servants always know these things, and mine, in particular, kept a most exact tally of all the

young ladies who set foot in the house, and inquired carefully into their antecedents, scenting a possible mistress in every marriageable spinster.

"Let us send the letter by the quick post in the red envelope," suggested the Emperor, after he had extracted all that Williams had to tell. "So the Beautiful Red Lady will arrive here all the sooner."

And the Celestials being a painstaking nation, he proceeded to transfer the whole of the effusion, without omitting a word, on to a series of telegraph forms, to the great benefit of the Revenue and probably to the corresponding astonishment of the operator in the telegraph office. His Celestial Majesty's object was attained, however, for the telegram, going first to Danescourt, was despatched on to Esmée in London, and she received it in the afternoon instead of two posts later.

I have misrepresented Esmée if I have not depicted her as an impetuous lady, who acted first and took thought afterwards. As soon as she gathered the drift of the Emperor's communication, those portions interpolated by the Blessed Damozel being the most intelligible, she darted for an ABC timetable, discovered a five o'clock train for Stamborough, and came down by it, without consulting anybody, except by telegram from Euston. She arrived at Blatchford in time for dinner, and found the Emperor trembling with combined impatience and relief in the Long hall. The alarm of Williams had also been excited, and though he failed to see the exact utility of Miss Sidney at this crisis, he opened the door to her with much warmth of welcome, and delayed not to confide in her his great anxiety concerning Mr. Randolph.

"And 'is Majesty 'as been in a great state, miss," he added.

"But what am I to do?" Esmée asked of the Emperor.

"I don't know where Mr. Randolph is any more than you do."

"You found him once," asserted Chin-Wang confidently.

"But then he was in his own house and it was easy. Now—"

"I think he is at my Ambassador's house," said the Emperor.

"Ah!" ejaculated Esmée.

"I would go to see, but how can I go to see? Enemies are there, and if I were slain, then all Louis's work would be undone. Neither can I write to Sung-Ching, to betray him."

"Who is Sung-Ching?" asked Esmée, catching at a clue in order to help herself to an understanding of the Emperor's confused discourse.

"Sung-Ching is the brother of Sung-Taou, who is dead, and my faithful subject. I trust Sung-Ching, for I loved the dead. But he is one of the Ambassador's people, and Louis believes him a traitor. If I wrote to him, the Ambassador would know, and perhaps Sung-Ching's plans would be spoilt."

"Couldn't I go and see this Sung-Ching?" asked Esmée, as they seated themselves at the dinner-table in the Dutch room.

"I could give you a letter. I have written one even now," said the Emperor. "I wrote: 'I, the Son of Heaven, command that you set Louis Ran-Doff at liberty, whether it be to my good or whether it be to my evil.' And I wrote it in my own tongue and signed it with my own name, that Sung-Ching may know it is a decree. The Son of Heaven speaks, and he must be obeyed."

"But they cannot detain Mr. Randolph!" cried Esmée, with her head on high and her eyes flashing; "he is a British subject! It is perfectly illegal! A question might

be asked about it in the House of Commons! Your Ambassador had better take care!"

"When I return to Cambaluc, I will deprive him of his carbuncle button," promised the Emperor.

Esmée, not much consoled by this dire threat, gazed vaguely at the incomprehensible characters of the Emperor's letter, which he had handed to her, and thought, having already acted.

"I must go back to London," she finally announced; "I see there is a train at ten o'clock."

"Will you not stay? I am not safe alone," pleaded the Emperor childishly.

"Where is Doctor Pilkington?" asked Esmée.

"I do not know. Will-Yams will know. He is climbing mountains far away, over the sea. Louis said so."

"He had better be telegraphed to," said Esmée. "The worst of it is I can do nothing till to-morrow."

"Then stay here," put in the Emperor again.

"Oh, impossible. Besides, I could do no good here. At least by going back I can see my brother and consult with him."

"Is your brother brave and wise?" asked the Emperor dubiously.

"He is very brave,"—a smile flickered on Esmée's face—"he will probably suggest battering down the doors of the Embassy."

"I would not let him do that," said the literal Emperor; "guns might be behind and your brother would be killed and you also, and perhaps Louis. I would speak softly to them of the Embassy and ask to see Sung-Ching."

"Oh, I don't think I shall speak very softly," returned Esmée, with a war light in her eye; "however, we shall see about that when I get there. And perhaps Mr. Randolph isn't there after all."

"If he does not come back and if you do not know where he is, enemies have him," said Chin-Wang decidedly; "and it is there enemies live, for Louis has said so many times, and I remember always and I make no mistakes. I do not even know why he went from me, but I supposed you would know."

"But I don't know everything," protested Esmée.

"When you love you know, and you love Louis," said the Emperor calmly.

Esmée's fair skin showed blushes very easily, but she recovered herself as she saw that the Emperor regarded his own somewhat startling remarks as perfectly commonplace, and returned silent thanks to Heaven that the servants were out of the room. His Majesty himself turned quite coolly to another subject.

"I will telegraph," said Esmée, as she was leaving to catch the 10 o'clock train at Stamborough, it being a five-mile drive, "and let your Majesty know what happens, whether Mr. Randolph is at the Embassy, and—and if he is safe."

"Tell him," said the Emperor, "that I will not suffer myself to be killed if I can help. Will-Yams," he added, turning to that faithful domestic, "you will tell all the people to watch more to-night than any night, for much danger is at hand."

"Pre'aps your Majesty would like to see the 'ead detective," suggested Williams.

"No; I would not like to see any people," said the Emperor, with a return to his old aversion to strangers. And for fear of such a consummation overtaking him unawares, he bolted back into the Marble hall without further leave-taking of Esmée. He found refuge among the echoes, where no detectives disturbed him. Since the affair of the footman, the doors to the subterranean

passage, the saloon and the banqueting hall, had all been securely locked, and there was no way into the Marble hall except from the Long hall.

Esmée in her train was swinging into Euston, brakes down, when the Emperor left off vaguely rolling the red ball up and down the billiard table and began to think of retiring to rest. He dawdled up the stairs between my room and his own, and paused to look out of a window on the landing which opened on to the garden. As he looked, a dark figure crossed the patch of light thrown by the open window, and he knew that the night watchmen were on the alert. There was a rustling in the bushes underneath the window, as a cat or such night-walking animal crept on some nefarious pursuit, and from the trees in the park beyond the garden came the cry of a little lonely owl. As the Emperor still lingered on the stairs, a sudden dull roar rent the heavy country stillness like a veil, and in a moment the night was alive. A blaze leapt up in the garden below the window; little specks of light were seen bobbing and dancing from the direction of the stables in the park beyond; several dark figures skurried across from the front of the house. The Emperor leant far out of the window, but he could see nothing round the angle of the house. Then a dim recollection of Sung-Ching's words, and a blind panic of his own, turned his steps to my room. He knew where I kept my keys, and he had often amused himself on wet days by exploring the vast crypts under the house. He snatched a bunch of keys from the drawer in which they lay, fled down the stairs to my private entrance to the subterranean passage, slammed and locked the heavy door behind him, and never paused till he was in the farthest corner of the cellar, barking his shins over bins of the priceless old port of fifty years ago.

In the park, the sound of the explosion had drawn a crowd of the colony that gathered round the big house, to the yawning gap in the wall of the park on the far side of the Blatch, some quarter of a mile from the front door. A patch of dry bracken near the wall was blazing, set alight none knew how nor paused to inquire. Its lurid light, and the twinkling glimmer of many lanterns, as well as the magnesium light blazing in the garden, made night into day for yards round, and reflected themselves in the waters of the Blatch gliding by in the darkness. In the untimely glare, men hurried up and down, talked and shouted, and achieved nothing, as far as any discovery of the perpetrator of the outrage went. One very frightened small boy belonging to the nearest lodge affirmed with chattering teeth that he had heard wheels and galloping horses' hoofs down the road towards Melton in the very moment of the explosion. The lodge-keeper and two night watchmen, who might have been more explicit, were discovered near the scene of the disaster past all power of giving evidence. The mutilated remains of a fourth person were found in the very breach itself. Every servant in the house, every stableman in the stables, and every gardener in the garden, roused by the noise, rushed out with that vague instinct of taking to the open air which seems to beset people in an earthquake, and joined the army of night watchmen. The presence of this excited, terrified, and chattering herd of menials merely added to the confusion, and increased the difficulty of keeping the cordon round the house. The night watchmen did their best; but no one was in command, and there was neither Pilkington nor myself to order the superfluous persons away and to control their unreasoning panic. The park was like pandemonium let loose, and not one of the crowd which rendered it so

realised that they were making the task of their would-be guardians herculean by their lack of self-control.

In the wing set apart for the use of the children, Cuckoo and the Blessed Damozel woke up with a start and found their nurses' places empty. Terror was in the air, and the darkness was thick; Cuckoo, urged by motives he could not have accounted for, burst into tears. The Blessed Damozel, less lachrymose, ran out of the room to the head of the stairs which led to the front hall, called and listened. But there was no sound save a strange, dull murmur from the park, and a light blazing in at the windows drove the Blessed Damozel back to the side of her weeping brother's cot.

"Get up, Cuckoo," she said firmly, "the house is going to be burnt down, and we must run away."

Cuckoo believed most implicitly in his sister, who seemed to his infant mind a sort of Valkyrie, brave and strong and inspired above all mortals, except, perhaps, Uncle Louis, for he had long ago probed to the depths the fallacies of nurses and discovered that even Aunt Violet was a broken reed to trust to withal. At the Blessed Damozel's bidding he dried his eyes on the tail of his little nightgown, and clambered out of his cot, without a shadow of doubt that in following her lead he would be delivered from all nocturnal peril. Hand in hand, they pattered down the stairs and across the hall to the front door. Cuckoo shivered at the contact of his bare feet with the pavement and hung back, but a glimpse of the light through the windows brought him up into the collar again. The Blessed Damozel tried the front door, but it was locked and bolted.

"We'll go to Uncle Louis's room and get out by the little court," she announced in her decided voice. "Come along, Cuckoo. I don't think the house is burning badly yet."

"I'll tell Uncle Louis!" whimpered Cuckoo.

"Perhaps Uncle Louis has comded back, and we'll find him in his room," said the Blessed Damozel, a new idea striking her.

"Let's go to Uncle Louis!" squealed Cuckoo, recovering much composure at the talismanic name.

Down the darkness of the Long hall they pattered ; the Blessed Damozel confidently leading, while Cuckoo, clinging to her hand, squeaked and swerved in the rear. Of course they found my room dark and deserted, without so much as a spark of light striking through the windows looking out over the little court. They paused in the doorway, the Blessed Damozel holding back the velvet *portière*, while Cuckoo buried his feet luxuriously in the soft woolly doormat, and faced the landing window out of which the Emperor was leaning not so long before. As they stood there a head abruptly appeared at the window, silhouetted against the light in the garden. A sudden instinct prompted the Blessed Damozel to shrink back into the folds of the *portière*, with her hand over Cuckoo's mouth, almost stifling that luckless youth. The head ducked for a moment, then reappeared, and instantly a long lean body slithered over the window-sill and landed noiselessly on the stairs, up which it stole with the lightness of a ghost, with never a creaking board to mark its passage.

"It's a wicked man," whispered the Blessed Damozel into the ear of the choking Cuckoo ; "only a wicked man would come in by the window. Don't you remember the dreadful wicked man who shot at the Majesty-Emperor ? I'm going to see where he's going to."

The Blessed Damozel, like Nelson, had not grasped the dictionary definition of the word fear. Boldly she ran up the stairs in time to see the gliding figure before her vanish into the room above mine.

"That's the Majesty-Emperor's room," she exclaimed in a whisper to the following Cuckoo. "Wicked men mustn't be left loose; they must be locked up in prison."

She darted across the landing to the door of the room, and with all her small force turned the key in the lock, just as the intruder's hand seized the handle on the other side.

"Run, Cuckoo, run!" shouted the Blessed Damozel, "run downstairs and scream for somebody."

So that Williams, returning to the house to fetch something and hurrying towards my room, was encountered by Cuckoo, hopping down the stairs in his nightgown and squealing like a pig under a gate from mingled motives of terror and obedience.

CHAPTER XXVI

SUNG-CHING MAKES A FRESH DEAL

WAS left in solitude for two whole days in the cheerful semi-dark room in which I was, imprisoned, and saw nobody but a diurnal Celestial, who brought me food of which I was undisguisedly suspicious, and who had evidently been forbidden to speak to me, for his only reply to my questions was an irritating and idiotic laugh. After a period of two days, as I said before, spent with my gloomy and furious reflections for company, five or six Cathayans, armed to the teeth, presented themselves and intimated that I was to leave the room and follow where they chose to lead. I emerged into the light of day blinking like an owl and with my always violent temper with an edge on it like a razor. We went through a swing door of baize, which I noticed cut off my prison-room from the rest of the house, and was so thick, heavy and deadening to sound, that I might have yelled all day at the pitch of my lungs without anybody finding out my place of concealment. The swing door opened into a passage which again gave on to a staircase, down which my guards clattered with me in their midst till they reached a room to the left of the front door, guarded like the Gate of Paradise by a Mongolian angel with a drawn sword. The hall was full of Cathayans, and they were all armed and all wore a truculent demeanour; no white was within

range of vision. At the door guarded as aforesaid, my escort fell back and left me to enter the room alone. I found myself face to face with the Cathayan Ambassador and the perfidious Sung-Ching.

The Ambassador, a Mongol of extremely malign countenance, bent his head courteously as I came in ; but I was by no means prepared to meet politeness with politeness, enraged as I was by the infamous conduct of the two perjured villains before me. I glared from the Ambassador to Sung-Ching and back again, and opened the conversation in a tone in which diplomacy was swamped by displeasure.

"I understand that I am in the Cathayan Embassy," said I, in accents which threatened thunder in the air ; "I cannot believe that your Excellency does not know that it is illegal to detain a British subject."

The Ambassador took this veiled menace with the utmost coolness.

"All that I have to say, honourable Excellency," he remarked suavely, after a few flowery observations with no particular bearing on the business in hand, "is that Her Imperial Majesty's Government are prepared to set you at liberty if you will comply with one or two trifling conditions. I feel sure that you will see the reason and necessity for not endangering your health by a longer incarceration under this roof, and that you will accept Her Majesty's easy terms with the readiness that befits a man of your august wisdom and knowledge of the world."

"What are the conditions ?" I said, abruptly breaking in on his preamble.

"Her Imperial Majesty has graciously consented to overlook your opposition to her divine will——" he began.

"I am very much obliged to Her Imperial Majesty," I snortingly interrupted.

"—And in consideration of the course which events

have taken," he proceeded somewhat obscurely, "will be pleased to return you your freedom, on condition that you will sign a document relinquishing all opposition to the Imperial Government for the future and pledging your word to keep silence about the last step which, to its much regret, it has been obliged to take in detaining you here till its purposes were accomplished."

"I utterly refuse to do anything of the sort," I returned. "I will publish your infamy and that of your disgraceful Government oh the housetops."

"Then Her Imperial Majesty will be reluctantly obliged to continue to deprive you of your liberty," uttered the complacent Ambassador.

"If you think a fairly well-known man like myself can be shut up indefinitely in this den of iniquity without any of his influential friends finding it out, let me tell you you are quite wrong," was my retort.

"There are ways and means of transporting unnecessary persons from place to place, honourable sir," replied the Ambassador, as quietly as ever; "and there are drugs against the potency of which no man is proof. The Government of the Yellow Empire is very powerful, Excellency, and you did not do wisely to set yourself up against it."

"Once for all, I decline your monstrous conditions, and I defy your Cathayan Government to do its worst," I exploded in his malignant face.

This conversation had of course been in Cathayan, and here Sung-Ching, who had been sitting at a desk some way off, quietly shaping a quill pen with a knife, began to hum through his teeth a well-known musical song.

"All motive for this contumacy is now removed," interposed the Ambassador, still in silky tones; "your charge is dead."

For a moment I was staggered. If this were true (and he spoke positively), I would certainly be in as remarkably unpleasant a predicament as I had been in yet. In the moment of my nonplussed silence, I caught in Sung-Ching's humming, almost under his breath, words, English words at that, while his face wore the usual mask-like Cathayan impenetrability :

"Pay no attention to me-e,
Keep up ferocious looks.
Do not believe what he says.
Sign no paper at all.
All will be well, be patient——"

"I await your answer, Excellency," put in the smooth voice of the Ambassador, taking no more notice of Sung-Ching's subdued hum than of a wasp buzzing on a window-pane.

"Seem to be thinking it over,"

hummed Sung-Ching in his raucous Mongolian twang.

"My answer is—is——" I stammered. "Will you allow me to see the paper you expect me to sign?"

"It is here."

I cannot read Cathayan decently, but I pretended that I could to gain time.

"Say you will sign with a J pen;
Nothing but quills is here,"

chanted Sung-Ching absent-mindedly, as he rummaged in a drawer in the desk before him.

"Have you got a steel pen?" I asked, blindly following Sung-Ching's lead. "I cannot write with quills."

"Where are the steel pens, Sung-Ching?" asked the Ambassador, turning to his subordinate, who, with

his head in the drawer, was humming softly and now inarticulately.

"Steel pens? They are, I think, in your Excellency's honour-worthy safe. Will your Excellency give his servant the keys that he may fetch them?" returned Sung-Ching woodenly.

"No, no," said the Ambassador doubtfully. "In the safe in my room, you say? I will fetch them myself."

"Key never leaves his person,"

hummed Sung-Ching with the countenance of a bland idiot.

There were two doors to the room besides the one by which I came in. The Ambassador passed through the farthest from where I was standing and the nearest to Sung-Ching's unobtrusive seat. That yellow enigma rose noiselessly from his seat, glided to the door as it closed upon the bulky figure of his chief, and turned the key in the lock.

"If he finds pens in his safe, I will eat them without salad dressing," he remarked in an agreeable tone, and lifted a coil of rope from the drawer in which he had been making researches during his humming. "Bind me up with this, not too loosely," he said, coming towards me; "gag me with a handkerchief and leave me here a victim to your ferocious brute strength. The third door leads to my room; from the window you can escape into the next house. After that, you must trust to your own wit to save yourself."

I roped him up joyously, without waiting for a moment to ask the motives of his manœuvre, and was about to thrust a handkerchief into his mouth when I remembered the Ambassador's recent statement.

"The Emperor is dead, then?" I remarked interrogatively.

Sung-Ching shrugged his shoulders.

"I have no information," said he. "There was a delay in the departure of the apparatus which was to force a way into your park, and it is *possible* his Majesty may still be alive. Waste no more time, I beg of you."

I effectively took away his power of speech, when we heard the footsteps of the Ambassador at the door. He tried the lock. At the same moment, my hand was on the handle of the third door. And thereupon arose a desperate clamour in the hall outside. The Ambassador rattled the door handle and called Sung-Ching. That Celestial writhed on the hearthrug, and I stopped dead in my tracks, for in the uproar outside I recognised English voices shouting. I looked at Sung-Ching, who wriggled spasmodically in an effort to express his ideas. The Ambassador drummed loudly on his door and shouted for help. The door into the hall was torn open and a couple of policemen appeared in the opening. Behind them, with the light of combat and triumph on her face, was Esmée Sidney.

"Mr. Randolph, I believe?" said the foremost constable.

"That is my name," I said; and leaving the door, the handle of which I was still grasping, I unlocked the second one and set free the imprisoned Ambassador. Sung-Ching, on the rug, gave a last kick to force his condition on his chief's notice, and stooping, I un gagged him and raised him to his feet. During these proceedings, I heard the constables informing the Ambassador that they were armed with a warrant to search the Embassy for my person. Sung-Ching interpreted, feigning to be much blown by his recent struggles, and the Ambassador looked crestfallen.

Here I went forward to meet Esmée. I might have

said a thousand things, called her the angel come to let Saint Peter out of prison, or in some way expressed gratitude for the rescue for which I could see with half an eye I was indebted to her efforts. But nothing came to my unready tongue of all this that I should have said.

"Miss Sidhey," I said idiotically instead, "do you still think it a good thing to be a diplomat?"

As if in answer to this inanity, she smiled and said,—

"This is my brother Philip."

Philip shook hands in a manner calculated to give great pain.

"Not much of a lot, these yellow devils," he said, "with the all-embracing scorn of eighteen."

show a bit of fight, or I should have had the pleasure in punching their heads!"

As Philip was well over six feet in height and a young man of most violent aspect, there seemed to be some intelligence in the non-belligerent attitude of the invaded Cathayans. They stood about the hall, betraying neither chagrin nor satisfaction, nor even the faintest interest in events as they passed; and within the room where we were standing, the Ambassador and his secretary, after their first exhibition of a slight disappointment, were to be full as impassive.

The constables, full of the importance of the occasion, were anxious to take down affidavits from everybody present. Sung-Ching tried to make terms. The Cathayan Embassy were obviously in a tight place, and the fact that Sung-Ching a while ago had, for obscure purposes of his own, seemed willing to aid and abet my escape, did not induce me to assist His Celestial Majesty's representatives when they appealed to me.

"You really cannot expect me to care whether you are

discredited or not," I returned ; "you are already sufficient
discreditable to satisfy anybody, in my opinion."

"It might not," said Sung-Ching quickly in German, "altogether to your benefit that Her Imperial Majesty she recall us just now. Naturally his Excellency will mention the episode if you do not, as he has decided failed in his object. Can you not wait to make it public till you find out whether the Son of Heaven is alive or dead? Remember if you take steps against the Emperor it may plunge the two countries into war. If you find the Great Pure One is dead, of what avail will that be?"

"Yes, I think of all that when you were at
I not long ago," I retorted, speaking the same
a while.

"What?" asked Sung-Ching uneasily.
speak Russian. Young man looks to me as if Philip; "that you
understood."

"No, I do not," I returned. "If Sung-Ching
man, if I know anything of Sandhurst cadets, he would
be able to follow us very consecutively."

"You were speaking of my action a little time back," resumed Sung-Ching, still apparently not quite at ease in his mind; "but you must remember," with the snake-like upward glint of his cunning eyes, "that then we had no witnesses."

"If I consent not to bring this affair into court, I shall have some security that you will keep the peace," said I.

"The life or death of the Son of Heaven is the security of our peace," replied Sung-Ching; "against personally the Empress Ah-Seu has no quarrel."

"Ah, I don't trust to that!" I remarked; "I know the Empress and her methods better."

"Will you not engage to take no steps till you

been down to your house and seen how affairs stand?" asked Sung-Ching with the air of one who bears with infinite patience the vagaries of a troublesome maniac. "Do you not see that for the present our hands are tied?"

"I am merely trying to understand——" I began.

"Ah, do not try to understand!" he interrupted; "it is always impossible to do so, and in this case doubly so. How can any of you that live in the West fathom our Cathayan politics?"

"How indeed?" I echoed in considerable disgust, for I did not know what to make of him. "Meanwhile," I continued in Cathayan, so that the Ambas. have the full benefit of my remarks, "you must know that I hold this over your heads, and that if I fresh acts of aggression against His Celestial Ma., will know what to expect." Leaving the perf. Ambassador and his tortuous secretary to stomach this as best they might, I turned to the constables. "I suppose, being the person aggrieved, I have a right to arrange as I think fit, and I think it inexpedient for this affair to come out at present; but if exigences oblige, I can always call upon you as witnesses."

"Do you mean to say," interposed Esmée, "that you're going to let these creatures off?"

"I think it would be wiser to take no steps against them present," I said.

"After they have imprisoned an Englishman?" interjected Esmée.

"When you come down to it, it wouldn't be much fun sing 'em up and jawing 'em in a stuffy law court," remarked Philip. "If one could thrash the brutes now!"

"Let me beg of you to think it over!" entreated Esmée. "I have thought it over," I returned, for every moment

more of reflection convinced me that I was right, "and I don't see that my position makes it possible to exact poetical justice. If it did, I would have it to the uttermost farthing."

"But don't you think leniency is thrown away on people of this sort," she insisted.

"It is not leniency, it is hedging," I replied. "I am afraid," as she looked puzzled and Philip obviously thought I was mad or talking Greek, "that I speak in riddles, but it is simply impossible to explain in five words all the wheels within wheels of this affair. I will try and make it to you outside. At present, my chief desire is house of torment."

back to the constables, who stood stolid, orders, and dismissed them; I repeated to Esmée and the Ambassador the menaces I had already used, and exacted their unreliable promises of good behaviour. I then turned back to Esmée and her brother, and followed them through the ranks of unmoving Celestials into the free street.

"I must go and catch a train," remarked Philip, gazing at his watch. He lived at that time in a state of catching trains. "Esmée, you can look after yourself, can't you? Randolph'll see you home, I daresay."

And thus cheerfully divesting himself of all responsibility, he rushed into the nearest hansom and was no more seen.

Gladly accepting the burden he had laid down, I whistled another hansom up from the adjacent Portland Place, and in a few minutes the Cathayan Embassy and its unpleasant associations were behind us. As we were trotted towards Portman Square, Esmée in a few words gave me the history (afterwards elaborated by the Emperor) of her descent upon Blatchford.

"I never can be sufficiently grateful to you," I remarked; "but why did you do it?"

She suddenly began to arrange her veil at the little looking-glass at the side of the hansom.

"Oh, why do you think?" she returned; and there was something strained in the indifference of her voice.

"I hope," I blurted out, determined to make a dash for the truth at all hazards, "that you didn't do it in the hope of pleasing Giles. I assure you it wouldn't please Giles in the slightest degree. I am not in the least precious to Giles."

"Giles!" she ejaculated.

"I assure you——" I began and broke why——" I broke off again. A glimmering of truth dawned upon me. "Esmée!" I cried.

In an instant she was all in a blaze of colour, half bent like a flower on its stalk, her lips parted. I leaned over her to catch my name from them, invested with a halo it had never worn before. Then she sprang erect like an unstrung bow, and with a face of horror.

"Oh please, please think of the people in the streets!" she exclaimed.

"*Damn* the people in the streets!" I ejaculated, and straightway plunged into a bog of apology. "I beg your pardon—I didn't mean that—it slipped out. Oh, never mind what I say or who's there! only, for God's sake put me out of my misery by telling me if you could care for instead of Giles?"

"Giles, always Giles!" she cried almost indignantly; "who says I like Giles?" And then with a sudden burst, "How dreadfully stupid men are!"

: glimmering became the broad light of day. I would liked to have burst out of the hansom and danced polka on the hollow back of the horse." This being

impossible, and Esmée absolutely refusing to let me kiss her, though I should scarcely have supposed she would mind publicity as much as all that, I poured forth a stretch of delirious drivel such as I could not submit to the scornful eye of posterity. Before I had said half that I meant, the nansom slackened down and stopped before the house in Portman Square to which it had been directed to take us. I pushed up the trap-door in the roof.

"Don't stop here!" I shouted; "go to—to—let me see—the Coronet Theatre on Notting Hill."

CHAPTER XXVII

THE EMPEROR MAKES A HANDSOME OFFER

THE trouble about everything pleasant in this life is that it is of such short duration. If misfortunes wou'd only give us the cursory glimpse in at our door, whic " " we ever get from good luck, it would tend to be and be much more satisfactory than the way in are at present adjusted. To break a lookin, supposed to bring you seven years of bad luck, but is no recipe under the sun for securing a similar continuity of the smiles of Fortune. On the present occasion, my triumphal progress in the heavenly chariot which men call Hansom Number—I forget what—was disturbed by a consciousness at the back of my mind that my place was not there at Esmée's side, vaguely traversing the wilds of Bayswater, but at Blatchford, or as far on the way thereto as steam would take me in the time. This consciousness worked its way from its previous unobtrusive place in the background to the first row of the mental stalls, and waxed larger as it came till it filled all my thoughts and conversation. I explained to Esmée at great length my reluctance to leave her even for five minutes, and the urgent necessity of my taking action on behalf of my defenceless emperor. She, wisest and least exacting of women, only led me on the path of duty and volunteered to come and see me off at the station. Fortunately there was a

plethora of trains about midday to one or other of the stations accessible to Blatchford, which shows the convenience of living in a hunting country.

I was down at my destinatory station under two hours, and drove up in a fly to my lodge gates, where the lodge-keeper stopped me with the utmost excitement, and could hardly be convinced even by ocular demonstration that it was I myself returned to the seat of government. I saw by his disordered behaviour that something direful had taken place in my enforced absence, and was prepared for my reception at the front door by a group led by the rector and composed of all the heads of the various den-

in my small colony.

"I prepared for anything or everything," I said, of the fly. "Only tell me one thing at once—
Emperor alive or dead?"

"we could tell you, it would simplify matters a great deal," remarked the rector, "but the Emperor has not been seen since dinner-time yesterday."

"What form did the attack take, and when was it?" I asked.

"Walls is all blown to bits, sir," said the stud groom.

"Dyningmite*, that's what it were, sir," thrust in the head gardener.

"Joe Simmons, the lodge-keeper, he've been killed, and two o' the 'tecs," added Parsons.

"Miss Theodora, sir, she locked a man hup in 'i Majesty's room, and 'e got through the window on to the roof," went on Williams.

All these persons spoke at once, eager to pour forth information. Coming in this form, however, it was practically useless, so I told them to reserve it, and asked to see the head detective. The rector and I awaited his coming in the Arabic room. He, an alert-looking man,

with a quiet yet brisk manner, unravelled the excited remarks of the menials, and gave the situation at a glance. An entrance had been forced into the park by means of explosives which had cost the lives of four men, and one of the aggressors, secured by surprising action on the part of the Blessed Damozel, was even now in a state of siege on the roof.

"And the Emperor's body has not been found anywhere?" I asked, harking back to the most important part of the matter.

"No, sir, the Emperor hasn't been seen alive or dead since last night."

"Is it possible, do you think, that he can have been kidnapped in the confusion?"

"I think it highly improbable, sir."

"I will go up and have a look at his room," I said. "Are you sure there were no traces of blood or signs of a struggle there?"

"Quite sure, sir."

The rector and the detective followed me up the Long hall to my private staircase. My room door was wide open, and I paused to shut it, looking in at it with affection as I did so. I had passed the last two nights sleeplessly in a vastly different place. As I looked in my sharp eye caught a glint of something on the carpet, and I went in and picked it up. It was a bunch of keys.

"Somebody's been at my key drawer," I said, and then wheeled round on the rector and detective. "It's all right. I know where the Emperor is. The key of the subterranean passage is gone."

I did not wait to see whether this explanation were as lucid to them as it was to me. I simply dashed down the stairs to the door of the passage, and trying the same found it locked. To rush round to Williams's quarters and

demand the key of the further end of the passage, to switch on the electric light and illuminate the paved floors and massive walls, was the work of a few minutes ; then the rector, the head detective, and I, with Williams as a rearguard, penetrated into the arched wilderness of the crypt. It was lighted from end to end by electric light, but I had no sooner switched it on at one end than it was promptly extinguished from the other ; thereby revealing to me beyond a doubt the presence of some other person well acquainted with the geography of the place. Indeed, the manipulation of electric buttons was always a perennial source of amusement to my Emperor.

"It is all safe, your Majesty !" I sang out. "It is I, Louis, returned."

I switched on the light again and stood out well in its rays. In a moment, I saw a shadow moving uncertainly among the stacked wine bins ; then with a rush, Chin-Wang shot out of his concealment and flung himself on my neck.

"His Majesty, you see, is safe," I said, turning to the rector and the detective.

"I would not suffer myself to be killed if possible not," said the Emperor hastily and huskily ; "but I starve, Louis, I starve," he added pathetically.

"Suppose I had not come back, you would have gone on starving, sire," I remarked ; "and let me tell you, it was only touch and go."

"I knew you would back return," observed the Emperor with his usual calm certainty. "Enemies cannot prevail if Fate is with us."

"I don't think we ought to call it Fate," began the rector.

"Is that the not-right English word ?" said the Emperor innocently. "In my land we say : 'Heaven, my father,'

and ‘the All-strong Gods.’ Louis, have you seen the Beautiful Red Lady?” he went on, clinging to my arm as we trudged up the stairs towards the dining-room.

“I should think I had!” I ejaculated.

“I thought she was she you would have sent to seek for you,” remarked the Emperor lucidly.

“How did you know, sire?” asked I, laughing less because of the wit and humour of our conversation than from the pleasantness of things in general.

“I remember much and I make mistakes neyer,” said the Emperor complacently.

“If I could say as much, none of the events of the past eleven months would have taken place at all,” I remarked reflectively, and refused to explain to the rector. The Emperor was too anxious for luncheon to ask questions.

Fortified by refreshment, I left the Emperor with Cuckoo, who was inclined to be tearful, and the Blessed Damozel, who bore her blushing honours as the heroine of the night before becomingly, and betook myself to the novel and exciting pastime of stalking the gentleman on the roof. A ring of dependents encircled the house on every side so as to give the quarry no chance of escape, and Parsons, the two chief detectives, and I went up armed on to the roof, the rector declining to join in the chase on account of the chance of a scrimmage.

“It is not for myself that I am afraid,” he remarked when I rallied him, and to do him justice, I don’t think he was, “but I could not hear of shedding the blood of Christian fellow-man.”

“Bless your life, the man’s not a Christian!” I exclaimed reassuringly; “ten to one he’s a Cathayan, and in that case he’s nought but a yellow heathen, a son of Ham or some such inferior person—vermin, and made to be exterminated.”

"Then if he is not a Christian, all the more reason for saving him and giving him a chance of renouncing his errors," said the rector severely.

"You're quite wrong to think I want to shoot him," returned I; "except on the principle that it's far better to slay than to be slain, I am not at all fond of killing people. I would far rather give the brute in custody."

"That is a better spirit to approach the question in," said the rector patronisingly; "but all the same, I will not go up."

There were quite enough of us without his reverence to accomplish our purpose; in fact, he would not improbably have bungled it in his desire to be tender with the "fellow-man." In the absence of definite information concerning this gentleman's equipment, our stalking manœuvres had to be carried out with the utmost care. At first, I found myself amid a wilderness of leads and chimney-pots with never a human being in sight, though the shouts of the much excited cordon came up from below unceasingly. I walked over an expanse of roof without an idea but to get the business done with; then a shot whizzed past me and I hastily sat down in the gutter. A fresh yell resounded below, and a shout of "Beg your pardon, sir!" reached me from over the chimney-pots.

"This won't do!" I shouted back, rising to my knees and looking cautiously round a waterspout. "Nobody is to fire unless I give the word. Pass that along, will you?"

I crawled up a leaden slope and looked over the edge like a deerstalker. I espied Parsons waving a red handkerchief and emitting extraordinary noises as if he were out covert-shooting. The manœuvre failed to dislodge

our foe, who continued invisible. I shouted to Parsons, who looked up surprised.

"Keep it up, Parsons!" I shouted. "If you take this beat straight along to the corner yonder and then back to me we may do some good."

This was professional enough to please Parsons, who, with some waving of arms and shouting, succeeded in organising the rest of the criminal-stalkers as desired. In more fortunate days when the park was open to all, I understand that village swains brought their sweethearts to this trysting-place to perform the mystic ceremony of disfiguring my unoffending leads by cutting their initials thereon. Over these trophies of forgotten rustic loves, I watched operations which now promised to be less dangerous and more effective than before, lying myself comfortably behind a chimney. Parsons beat up the vast roof conscientiously, but as far as I could make out ineffectually, till a view hallo from one of the grooms told that the enemy had been sighted. A minute later, he glided into my own range of vision; he crawled across a ledge and paused behind a chimney. Even at that distance I could see that he was a Cathayan, though wearing European clothes. He glanced about him to right and left, but apparently did not see me, I being on a higher level. Then he crawled to the edge of the roof and looked over. That side there was a sheer drop into the garden, and he crawled back discomfited. The noise of the approaching impromptu beaters drove him forward and he came within range of me. Then I burst into evidence, extending an arm over my shelter.

"Hands up!" I sang out joyfully.

Whether he heard or understood or not, he saw at least my revolver, and leapt back into cover. But it was Hobson's choice, with the yelling and bloodthirsty beaters

behind and my lethal weapon before. Desperate, he swung himself bodily off the edge of the roof, and only the tips of his fingers were visible to me, as he climbed rapidly along, hand over hand. The menials in the garden below yelled frantically. I hastily climbed over the sloping roof towards the level of his hands. He was swinging in the air just over the winter-garden; in another moment he would be over the roof of our bedrooms, and safe to drop down as he would. I was hastening to cut him off when my foot slipped; I rolled over like a mountaineer on an Alpine glacier, and only caught a piece of piping just in time to save myself from an unpleasant death below; but as I did so, I stamped unintentionally, but violently, on his fingers. With a yell he let go, and next moment was heard crashing through the glass roof of the winter-garden.

Of course he was dead when he was picked up. And that made another of our eternal inquests.

"That is the awful part of this shocking affair, the wanton loss of life," said the rector, looking at me severely, as if he thought I did it all on purpose for my own personal amusement.

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Men must die," I remarked with purposeful flippancy, "*et j'en vois bien la nécessité, moi.*"

"But they need not be hurried before their Maker with this appalling suddenness," returned the rector in a tone reminiscent of pulpits. "Have you reflected what it means?"

"What do you think, your Majesty?" I said, turning to the Emperor, "would you like to die quickly or slowly? His Reverence is in favour of a lingering death."

"Oh, let me die at once, soon!" returned Chin-Wang

decidedly with a shudder ; "the English priest knows of it nothing at all."

"Then," said the rector to me, "you would deny your fellow-men the right of making their peace with God?"

"God is more kind-feeling than men," said the Emperor unexpectedly. "He asks little and men ask much." Then he rose suddenly and came to my chair, standing beside me with his hand on my shoulder. "It is all mistakeness, Louis," he remarked, "many men die because I am here, and at last you will wish me gone. I will go away, for I do not fear death, if it is short, and Sung-Ching will make it easy."

"Go away, sire? You? Why on earth——"

"Little reason have I to stay," said the Emperor sorrowfully. "The Beautiful Red Lady is in all your thoughts, and I am a part of your house you do not want. Very soon you will curse me, lest the Beautiful Red Lady will not come."

The rector pricked up his ears at these mysterious allusions.

"Look here, sire, this is all nonsense," I returned decisively; "if you think there is any cause that Miss Sidney—(I forgot if I told you, Mr. Abercrombie, that I am engaged to Miss Sidney)—in short, Esmée is just as much concerned for your Majesty's welfare as I am, and there can be no question——"

The Emperor took his hand from my shoulder and walked away towards the window.

"I think of women not much," he remarked, "no, not of the Beautiful Red Lady even. Evil are all their hearts. Me she will hate, and I would go before you hate me also."

"You wrong her, sire," I said indulgently, "you are mixing her up with the Empress Ah-Seu. English women are not like that, you know. • Different thing altogether."

"I will go," said the Emperor obstinately; "while I am here, your affairs are all east and west. Am I a fool that I should not know this?"

"I won't hear of your going. Hang my affairs!" I retorted; "they are no sort of importance, and your Majesty is."

"Another in my place is as good," insisted Chin-Wang; "the sons of my uncles are many, and my people do not wish to be ruled as the foreign man rules."

"I must beg your Majesty will not withdraw the honour of your presence from this slave." I relapsed into Tartar in the hope of being more convincing.

"I will go," said the Emperor, but less decidedly than before.

At this crisis, Williams appeared with a telegram. It was from my sister-in-law, short and peremptory, ordering me up to London, as she wished to see me. I disregarded the sacerdotal presence of the rector in my comments on this summons, as I wrote out the answer.

"'Impossible. Louis.' The same answer that I give your Majesty. What you propose is impossible. Come, sire, we have fought them so far, and we will fight them to the end. Buck up."

"I think I would not hinder——" began the rector.

"I am not afraid! it is not because I am afraid!" interrupted Chin-Wang, wheeling round.

"The loss of life warrants——" began Mr. Abercrombie again.

"For God's sake, let us have no more of this!" I said ungraciously. Then changing my note, for I did appreciate the magnanimity of the Emperor's intention, "Your Majesty would not wish to undo all that has been so laboriously done. What would Sung-Taou have said?"

This gave the Celestial potentate something to think about. He was still pondering on the probable ultimatum of the oracular Sang-Taou, when dinner was announced.

The next day came Pilkington, summoned from the Dolomites by Esmée's impetuous telegram. He said little, but he looked graver and greyer than ever.

CHAPTER XXVIII

LADY FRANCES MAKES A SCENE, AND I MAKE AN ADMISSION

“ RANDOLPH, *Blatchford, Stamborough.*

“ Coming down by midday train to-day. Absolutely necessary. FRANCES.”

THE mountain having firmly declined to move from its rural seclusion, this was Mahomet’s telegraphic response, handed to me as I went in to luncheon. It amused me, knowing my sister-in-law’s methods, to imagine her counting out her words with elaborate care not to exceed the mystic twelve. It was one of her favourite petty economies ; she thought nothing of expending money like water on dinners and parties (“for Violet,” of course), but she did grudge halfpennies on telegrams and sixpences to cabmen. Unfortunately, as I found out in the days of scarcity before excellent Uncle Oppenheimer died, the proverb which asserts that the pounds will take care of themselves if the pennies be but skilfully shepherded, is a perfect fallacy. Relying upon this saying, one may hoard halfpennies industriously, but will always find oneself overdrawn at the bank.

Meanwhile I sent the brougham to meet the absolutely necessary Lady Frances, and had my luncheon in peace.

She came to the local station (because it saves three and sixpence), and therefore by a stopping train, and only arrived when the Emperor, Pilkington and I were smoking in the Arabic room.

"Can I speak to you alone, Louis?" was her first remark, as she eyed my companions like a Gorgon in a Paris bonnet. On the Emperor she cast a particularly frigid stare.

I showed her into the French room and ordered her some coffee, which, however, she declined. She sat down in an uncompromising attitude in a Louis XV. chair, and I leant against the mantelpiece to listen to her absolutely necessary remarks.

"I wish to speak to you about Giles," she began without preamble; "the poor boy came to me and told me that he had proposed to Miss Sidney yesterday, and that she had refused him."

"It never rains but it pours," I remarked. Was not yesterday, though it seemed several years ago, the day of that halcyon drive?"

"What do you mean, Louis?"

"God alone knows. Well, and I suppose you were delighted?"

"Not at all; I am very distressed and unhappy and indignant, and I have come to see what you can do."

"My dear Frances, you take my breath away! Have you forgotten the conversation we had when first I got back from Cathay? when you called Miss Sidney dreadful, impossible, mercenary, and several other things? when you talked about a curse on your family and begged me to extricate Giles from an entanglement? Have you forgotten all that? She's an actress, remember. She's led a theatrical life and acted in improper plays and done things no girl can do. Do you mean to say you are

distressed, unhappy and indignant to have escaped such a daughter-in-law?"

"I was mistaken," said Lady Frances majestically, "I find that she was only a short time on the stage, where she showed *great talent*, and that it was all in order to provide money to educate her younger brother. That was noble of her in my opinion, though no doubt you, who are always so cynical about such things, will sneer at it" (an inarticulate protest from me); "and her brother will be Sidney of Sandwell Castle when old Philip Sidney dies. It's an excellent old county family, and the Duke of Amesbury's her cousin, and the Duchess of Leicestershire, and Lady Braemar and Lord Ramillies and the Charles Monteiths, and ever so many more people we know. I never knew all that before; I was under a misapprehension all the time."

"And having made all these momentous discoveries, you expect me to —?"

"I *think* you might have found them out before and not allowed me to misjudge the poor girl," said my sister-in-law reproachfully.

"Found them out? Again you astonish me. I didn't know you wanted to know of any extenuating circumstances of this young lady's proceedings; how was I to guess it? Besides, you know I don't care a blow who people are."

"No, it is one of the very regrettable things about you," she returned with the frankness of a relation who knows, or thinks she knows, that she may say anything she likes to you, so long as it is rude and personal enough.

"Also, if I remember right, when I suggested to you that perhaps you were 'misjudging the poor girl,' you scouted the notion," I added.

It was inconvenient to hear this, so my sister-in-law ignored it.

"But now that it has all been cleared up, Louis, surely you will help us?"

"Help you—how?"

"Why, by going to her and begging her to reconsider her decision. Tell her she will be welcomed by the family with *open arms.*"

"Heaven above us! what an inducement! But I'm afraid I can't do that, Frances."

"Why not?" she asked suspiciously.

"If you remember, you asked me to go to Miss Sidney before, and buy her off. I refused. Well, I refuse again, because Miss Sidney is engaged to be married."

"Indeed? Can that not be arranged?"

"Oh, is she to be bought off again?" I queried.

"Whom is it to?" demanded my sister-in-law.

"Me."

If I had wanted to hurl a thunderbolt or deal a *coup de théâtre* I succeeded beyond my wildest dreams. But Lady Frances was only struck dumb for one moment.

"You, Louis, you? Do you mean to say you will supplant Giles?"

"It is no case of supplanting, I assure you," I said.

"Miss Sidney never had the remotest intention of marrying Giles."

"But she encouraged him, the——"

"There, there; that's enough! And you're under a misapprehension again."

"But she is a——"

"No, no, Frances; keep it to yourself. You might regret it. Don't forget that she is going to be your sister-in-law."

I could not resist putting this in maliciously.

"Of course she is only marrying you for your money," remarked my sister-in-law, determined to leave unsaid nothing unpleasant for which there was any opening.

"So long as she does marry me, I won't ask too particularly for her motives," I returned with an ostentation of satisfaction that was meant to provoke and did not miss its mark.

"But is this fair? is it right?" burst out my sister-in-law.
"Is it your duty as his guardian?"

"Is it?" I asked mildly. "I don't know."

"Can't you see how you have deceived us? Can't you see how underhanded and treacherous it is?"

"No," I said, "I can't."

"Do you expect me to receive her?" she asked scathingly.

"I don't know," I returned; "on the whole, I think I would just as soon you didn't. Not till after the ceremony, at all events."

Finding me impervious to scorn and sarcasm, she betook herself to tears.

"My poor darling boy," she wept, "my one——" she was about to say "ewe lamb," but changed it to "Benjamin."

"I think," I remarked blandly, "that your son Giles is a great deal more like Reuben than Benjamin, who was a raging wolf, if I remember rightly."

"This is all your awful eccentricity, Louis," she solemnly assured me; "I knew it would bring you to something dreadful in time."

"To wit, matrimony with the young woman you are willing to welcome with open arms?"

"And I hear you have had more of those shocking occurrences, too. I don't indeed know what will become of us all. I always knew it was an evil day when you took up that horrible, that detestable Yellow Man. I believe he is at the bottom of the whole affair."

I could not help laughing.

"Yes, you may laugh, Louis," said my sister-in-law severely; "but I can tell you it is no laughing matter. I firmly believe that you are not quite sane."

"Well, don't tell your future sister-in-law till she has married me," I rejoined; "it is not sufficient grounds for a divorce, but I believe it could break off an engagement."

"One day I am certain you will repent," said my sister-in-law, with a prophetic air worthy of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel rolled into one.

"What, of my marriage? But most married people do, don't they? I ask you, as having experience."

"You are very flippant, Louis. This is all part and parcel of this odious pose of being unlike other people. Some day you will see what it will bring you to."

"You seem to think the destination in question is a lunatic asylum," I remarked; "but never mind, you won't be expected to pay my expenses."

"That is very coarse, Louis."

"I can be a good deal coarser than that. Like to hear me try?" I suggested.

"Good heavens, Louis, I should like to know how much you think I will bear? I should like to know what you think it will all end in."

"Ah," I said, "a thirst for knowledge has been the curse of woman since the world began."

"Do you mean to insult me?" My sister-in-law sat up very straight in her chair.

"I don't see why you should have a monopoly of plain speaking," I complained. No one accuses me of posing with impunity, anyhow.

"It is evidently of no use to speak to you," she remarked; "go your way, Louis."

"Thank you. I mean to. Will you go yours, please? Shall I order the brougham to take you to meet the next

train, as I suppose you don't want to stay and dine for the pleasure of meeting my friend the Emperor?"

She maintained a dignified silence until her vehicle came to the door. Then, as she left the house, she turned round for a parting shot.

"Poor Giles!" she said; "but I daresay he will find it a happy escape."

If she had not been already going, she would certainly have been requested to go after this ingratiating remark. As it was, she left me speechless on the doorstep, and drove away, triumphing doubtless in a certainty of having scored.

"When we balance books at the end of the year, there will be a lot of people for me to get even with," I remarked to Pilkington and the Emperor.

"Oh, one never gets even with anybody," returned the pessimistic Pilkington; "the only person who is ever got even with is oneself, and that's always for things one hasn't done."

"I *will* settle accounts though, sooner or later," I remarked with that calm satisfaction in the prospect which people call vindictiveness. "I am saving one or two beautiful things up my sleeve, and I know how to wait, so all ought to come to me, if there's any truth in proverbs."

"Seen the evening paper?" asked Pilkington, who thought me beneath contempt as an arguer.

The papers were full of wars and rumours of wars, and tucked away in a corner there was a despatch from Cambaluc stating that the health of "the Emperor" was said to be declining. A day or two later, Cathay and its affairs took up a much larger space in the public press than they had done for some months. The fact that the latest victim of the intrigues of which Blatchford was the centre was a Cathayan excited much comment, and a suspicion that

there really was "something in it" began to dawn on the minds of the public. The missionary, whose existence after all had been known to but few, might have been an escaped lunatic ; the keeper, still awaiting his trial, might have been drunk ; but when there followed in quick succession the incidents of the footman, of the infernal machine, and of the poisoned sweets, it needed a wide stretch of credulity to believe that all could have been coincidences, and without bearing on the fact that I had a Celestial in my house who claimed to be Emperor of Cathay. And when this last outrage became known its effect on the press was to make every one ask why it was that there was such a determination in the mind of some person or persons unknown to compass the death of my presumably inoffensive Mongolian inmate, by any means, fair, foul, or debatable.

The newspapers, of course, talked all round the subject, and made wild suggestions through more or less idiotic correspondents ; some one tried to interview the Cathayan Ambassador, who craftily lay low. A yet bolder man made a like attempt on me and was turned back relentlessly at the park gates. An illustrated paper published my photograph, and *Punch* wrote some verses about me. In short, if I had been the most assiduous of latter-day self-advertisers, my ruling passion could not have been more extensively gratified. A week ago, I should have been furious, and wasted much writing-paper in astonishing and grieving the editors of those papers ; but now I adopted the philosophic attitude of Gallio. To begin with, no newspaper controversy could much affect the situation ; our enemies, the Celestials, were absolutely impervious to public opinion, and our friends, the Foreign Office, had not, from the earliest development of the case, displayed any anxiety to meddle. Moreover,

Esmée was coming to stay at Blatchford, and before the importance of this event the rise and fall of empires paled into nothingness.

Duly chaperoned by an effaceable aunt of mercifully valetudinarian habits, my lady of the Titian locks made acquaintance with her future domain, and passed it under her august approbation. So as she was pleased; I was too, and abandoned myself to basking in the sunshine of her satisfaction. We had a glorious time, and forgot the aggressions of the Celestials. We revelled in our chains, like somebody in some poetry or other of which I forgot the exact substance and bearing; we made a Garden of Eden out of the prosaic and somewhat artificial park, and drew Water of Life from the insignificant Blatch with trout which we pretended were tarpon; we rode all the evening over the parched stretches of grass, and fancied we were guiding matchless Arab steeds over the pathless desert; and I, for one, made believe that I was a child again.

Meanwhile it is not in human nature to allow any fellow creatures to comfortably make idiots of themselves, more especially if they seem to be enjoying it, and few people indeed shared the wisdom of Esmée's aunt. From the Emperor, of course, we expected little, yet it was from him that we received the most consideration. But the Blessed Damozel had reigned too long to understand why she must abdicate, and she did so under protest; Cuckoo, too, quite failed to see why his sublime personality should suddenly be ignored by "Uncle Louis," and Pilkington was even more childish, cherishing a delusion that Esmée could possibly wish to listen to his dry conversation. Even the very servants were impelled by raging curiosity to invade us at all hours on the most frivolous pretexts, to waylay us in the halls and passages, and to follow us about the park. On the rare occasions when they ventured

within hail, however, they found me so extremely savage that they retired in disorder.

"May no one walk in the park except us?" asked the merciful Esmée mitigatingly, after one of these ebullitions.

"I think I shall enforce the Cathayan etiquette," I remarked. "When the Emperor drives in Cambaluc, nobody must come out and look at him; a very sound plan, which speaks well for the intelligence of the Far East."

"I think it must be dull for the Emperor never to see his subjects," she returned; "how does he get to know about them?"

"He doesn't," I answered; "he knows less of his subjects than I do, or you."

"Then he must know very little," she remarked, smiling, "for I am not at all up in the subject."

"The subjects, don't you mean?" I added fatuously.

Here we neared the gate out of which Violet and the Emperor bicycled on the day when Mr. Abercrombie's saintly missionary got loose. The lodge-keeper having spied us through the window, of course rushed out wide-mouthed on pretence of nailing up a creeper, which was perfectly secure. I frowned and turned away.

"How long will it last?" asked Esmée suddenly.

"What, our present blissful happiness? well, it won't be my fault if it doesn't last for the term of our natural lives."

"I have no doubts about that," and her tone was proud and tender at the same time. I indulged the craving of the lodge-keeper for a spectacle, hoping old age had shortened her range of vision. "But I meant," resumed Esmée, a few yards farther up the road, "about the Emperor and his stay here."

"What you too, darling? Is every one against the poor

little beggar except me? Even Pilkington has taken to keeping me up till two in the morning to argue about it."

"Oh no, no, I'm not *against* him! I wouldn't have him murdered for the world. But will it go on for ever? because you know, dear, the sort of life you lead here is charming, and *I* should be perfectly content with it, but it is not very usual, is it?"

"I understand. You have an objection to a *ménage à trois*, even though the third be only my wretched little Emperor. But *you* will always be able to go away whenever you like, you know."

"Why will you insist on misunderstanding me, like the hero of a third-rate novel? What makes you fancy I should want to go away? I only want to know how you think it will all end."

"Exactly what Frances asks, implying the while that the end will be disastrous. Why cannot your beautiful and charming sex be content with the evil of to-day instead of yearning after that of to-morrow? It is you and your sisters in curiosity that make the fortunes of soothsayers."

"I don't think that is much of an answer, dear," she replied, with a shade of reproach in her soft voice.

"I have trusted to luck all my life," I said, "and she will indeed be a fickle jade if she deserts me now."

We were sauntering along the road which hereabouts rose in a slight hill, and as I spoke the figure of the Emperor sailed into view on his yellow bicycle, coasting. Esmée looked after him as he passed.

"Isn't it curious how easily one gets accustomed to things?" she asked. "Both you and I have quite lost our sense of wonder; we neither of us think it strange to have the Emperor staying with us. And *that*—*that* little creature on a bicycle is the Emperor of Cathay!"

"Coasting down a hill, with a glamour of immemorial tradition trailing after him like the tail of a comet. And you would like this unique experience to be removed far from us."

"I don't say that," she returned, "but I should like the experience to be a little less dangerous."

Point was given to what she said by the fact that we were a few yards from the memorial I raised over the tomb of old Wu-Chow. That old mandarin never in life fought for anything so hard as I did over the six feet of earth that held him now. The rector wanted Wu-Chow's bones to rest in the churchyard among suicides, unbaptized infants and others ineligible to be included inside the pale of Christianity, and could not understand me in the least when I said it would be sacrilege. I added that the Emperor—who, though he took little interest in Wu-Chow as long as he was alive, was absorbed when it became a question of burying him—approved of the site of the mandarin's grave, and thought it nearly as suitable as if it had been located in Cathay, even going so far as to choose one for himself in another part of the park, in case his imperial remains could not be transported to his dominions. Mr. Abercrombie failed to grasp that his Majesty, in virtue of being a Celestial, was a greater connoisseur in sepulchres than himself. The rector even displayed so much lack of the sense of humour as to expect me to rear a cross over Wu-Chow's last resting-place and to be aggrieved when I insisted on a plain obelisk, engraved with the mandarin's name and the sacred inscription "Om-ma-ni Pe-mi-Hom."

"I call it encouraging idolatry," said the rector angrily.

"Well, why not encourage it?" I asked. "The Emperor is delighted."

"I am not," snapped our spiritual director.

"All right," I rejoined, "if you die in far Cathay, I will

take care you are buried with full Buddhist rites, to console you."

To return to Esmée and myself on the particular and eventful morning I was describing. We did not linger long at the grave of Wu-Chow, which indeed called up reminiscences by no means consonant with our present sentiments, but strolled on towards the house. As we crossed the garden, we saw a telegraph boy coming up the drive to the front door.

"Look there," I said to Esmée, "there may be an answer to some of your questions."

CHAPTER XXIX

THE TELEGRAPH BOY BRINGS A SOLUTION

THE messenger of Fate walked faster than we did, with the result that when we sauntered up to the portico, the telegrams of which he was the bearer were in the hands of Williams. There were two of them, and we took them into the Arabic room to open at our leisure.

"You don't seem in the least excited," remarked Esmée.

"I have long passed the primitive simplicity which trembles at a telegram," I returned. "What of awe or of alarm, or even of interest, is this dirty orange envelope likely to conceal?"

"Well, I am still primitive and simple," she observed, taking the said envelope away from me; "I nearly go mad with fright if I have a telegram. Something might have happened to Philip, you know."

"Or me," I appended; "I won't play second fiddle to Philip any longer. Say 'or me.'"

"Or you," she repeated obediently.

"Something is much more likely to happen to me, too," I added alarmingly: "we have had a good deal in the way of disaster and dissolution in these parts this year."

"Oh! you don't think there is danger any more?" she cried, coming nearer, with a prompt loss of interest in the telegrams.

"None for you," I assured her, "and little, I hope, for any of us."

"As if I cared whether it was for me," she said reproachfully; "but do you think they would ever dare again?"

"My dear, very dark are the ways of the Celestial, and inscrutable withal. I do not try to foresee his actions, only to be ready for them when they come. I think most likely he will make no further attempts, the last having caused the press to give tongue, but he hasn't succeeded in killing the Emperor yet. Call no man safe till he is dead."

"It is all very horrible," she murmured, and I felt her shudder as she leant against me.

"It hasn't improved my nerve, but I'm getting used to it in a kind of way," I reassured her. "Why don't you look at those telegrams?"

"Telegrams seem a very small thing when one thinks one is standing on a volcano," she remarked.

"I should be glad under the circumstances to be still able to open them. Now the first contains congratulations, and the other is about the fish for dinner."

She opened number one, then exclaimed "Oh!" and nearly threw it at me. It was from Violet, and tersely announced that Giles had written to say he was engaged to Miss Ruggles and that full particulars followed by post.

"My compunction, if I ever had any, is shattered," I exclaimed. "He has taken a short time to console himself, young ass!"

Esmée shrugged her shoulders, threw out her hands in her favourite gesture and quoted: "'Les momies des Pharaons ne sont pas morts comme l'amour d'avant hier'."

"It wasn't the day before yesterday, it was a month ago," I carped.

"But who is this Miss Ruggles?" asked Esmée, with a natural curiosity about her rival. "Do you know her? Is she pretty? Is she nice?"

"For my sins I know her," I replied. "I do not doubt that she will blossom in the society papers into a beauty of charm irresistible, for she has £6,000 a year. But my unbiased opinion is that whatever crimes and errors Giles may have committed or may be going to commit, he will be amply repaid by the lifelong companionship of that young woman."

"Oh, then she isn't very nice," said Esmée, with a certain satisfaction appearing in her tone. The perversity of human nature is such, that she would not have been in the least flattered by the assurance that her supplanter was a queen among women, though that would be the logical sequence of ideas.

"By the way, you met her once at luncheon at the Duchess of Leicestershire's. I was there too," I said, remembering that historic occasion suddenly.

"She made no impression on me," said Esmée; "you were there, you see."

"I daresay though, it will be quite a successful experiment," I resumed later, feeling charitable towards all men after this flattering admission; "she will doubtless put tiles on the roof at Tranes and a carpet on the staircase, and Giles will be satisfied. And she will be satisfied too, for she will reign where before she was only on sufferance, and will glory in reducing you to the position of a younger son's wife. Is your little vanity at all ruffled, darling?"

"Not in the least, thank you, dear," she answered with emphasis. "In fact, I have none at all."

"You are quite right," I remarked. "Love may make the world go round, but it is certainly vanity that makes it go crooked."

"I suppose it was really necessary he should marry money?" remarked Esmée tentatively.

"It was desirable, but not imperative," I returned. "Giles has had a ten years' minority already, and it has three more years to run. The estate could right itself with proper management, and without the assistance of *la belle Alberta*."

"And Violet? she too must make a rich marriage?"

"Violet suffered the usual fate of daughters," I answered, "and was left with just a little less than would satisfactorily cover her yearly dressmaker's bill, and an inheritance of expensive tastes from both sides of the house. I hope Violet will marry a South African millionaire, but I am afraid she will insist upon sharing the sordid lot of an English pauper."

"Like Theodora."

"Ah, Theodora was a minx and broke hearts, as the Blessed Damozel will do when she grows up. Are you sure," I went on, taking her chin in my hand and making her look me in the eyes, "that you don't regret marrying into such a family?"

"Whose matrimonial blunders are notorious, eh, dear?" she asked mischievously.

"Whose matrimonial good fortune, above their deserts, is notorious, you mean," I answered; "for even Miss Ruggles is too good for Giles."

"Giles whom you thought *I* wanted to marry," she retorted. "How you could imagine I could tolerate such a cr-r-r-eature, astounds me."

"By the contrast with the cr-r-r-eature you can tolerate, which shows my pretty modesty."

"I never rise when compliments are fished for," she remarked.

"I never waste time on an unprofitable pursuit like

fishing for them," I retorted, "I pay them myself in a loud voice, and the hearers may take me at that valuation or not, just as they choose."

"All this time we have forgotten the other telegram," remarked Esmée, hunting about for it. It proved to have got pushed away under a newspaper on the table.

"I feel that it would leave me cold," I remarked; "two excitements cannot surely come by wire at once."

I was wrong, for the second telegram was the more important of the two, so much so that it was well we opened the other first, or little attention would Giles's matrimonial schemes have claimed from us.

"LOUIS RANDOLPH, *Blatchford, Stamborough.*

"Private.

"Empress Ah-Seu died last Friday. Prepare his Majesty for restoration. Secret societies marching on Cambaluc. If victorious, as is practically certain, Emperor Chin-Wang will be recalled.

"SUNG-CHING, Secretary of Embassy."

"Victory! victory!" I shouted, and executed a war-dance round the room, to the great astonishment of Esmée, who had never seen me so lively before, and of the Blessed Damozel, who at that moment appeared, with her mouth open, holding the door-handle.

"Oh, I am so glad!" cried Esmée as she snatched up the telegram from the floor where I had dropped it. "Now you need never run into any danger again."

"Where's his Majesty?" I shouted.

"What's the matter, Aunt Esmée?" demanded the Blessed Damozel, dropping the door-handle and flying up to Esmée. "Is Uncle Louis pleased or—or angry?"

"Pleased, Theodora darling," returned Esmée, who

absolutely declined to use pseudonyms, "delighted, triumphant! It's all for the Emperor, dear, it's all so glorious!"

"Hás the Majesty-Emperor caughted a very big fish?" asked the Blessed Damozel in an awe-stricken voice.

I saw Pilkington leading Cuckoo's pony up to the portico, and threw up the window, shouting to him,—

"Samuel! Great news! The old lady at Cambaluc is dead, and the Emperor's recalled."

"God bless my soul!" ejaculated Pilkington, stopping dead. "I'd given up all hopes of it!"

Cuckoo's pony, suddenly checked, threw up its shaggy head, and Cuckoo squealed with nervousness; his yell, however, came in appropriately as a sort of cheer.

"Where is his Majesty?" I repeated.

"Bicycling up the drive this very minute," responded Pilkington, looking that way with the same interested expression he had worn on the *Flosshilde* when I told him that his patient really was the ruler of millions.

When the Emperor glided on to the asphalte under the portico and vaulted off his yellow machine, he was greeted by us all on the doorstep; I undisguisedly triumphant, shouting as the Randolph custom is, Esmée all smiles, hands clasped in delight, Pilkington puffed out like a pouter pigeon, the Blessed Damozel with a puzzled face, but dutifully capering in the Majesty-Emperor's honour, Cuckoo dead to all emotions except his relief at being on terra firma, and even the effaceable aunt in the background smiling in gentle but vague approval.

I went down the steps to meet the Emperor.

"I have an important announcement to make to your Majesty," I said, controlling my face to a proper gravity; "a death has taken place at Cambaluc in the Imperial Family."

"I wish the Imperial Family were all dead and buried also, with none to worship them as ancestors," replied the Emperor, quite viciously. "Who is now a guest in heaven?"

"Sire, it is the Empress-Dowager, Ah-Seu."

The Emperor gave a sigh of relief.

"She was a wicked woman," he remarked; "long ago should she have ascended on high if I yet reigned in Cambaluc. God has remembered her iniquities."

"As to reigning in Cambaluc, sire," I said; "with any luck you will soon do so again," and I read him Sung-Ching's telegram.

The weary, indifferent air, with which he heard of the usurping Dowager's death, fell from him like a mask. He seemed to grow straighter and taller before our eyes; his own brightened, and his voice rang true and strong as he answered as if to a summons:

"The Son of Heaven is ready."

Pilkington and I cheered involuntarily, and the Blessed Damozel's shrill note joined in; this at least she understood, and rose responsive. Esmée waved her handkerchief and expressed a sudden desire to sing, "God save the Queen," as a suitable outlet for enthusiasm. The aunt still smiled gently and vaguely in the background, out of which appeared also the surprised face of Williams to announce luncheon.

"Williams," I said, turning round to that valuable domestic, whilst Pilkington with a sudden development of sycophancy insisted on carrying the Emperor's bicycle up the steps, "his Majesty has been restored to his Empire and will shortly return there."

"Indeed, sir. I'm very glad to hear it, sir," interpolated Williams, in a bland tone of indifference.

"You can tell the other servants," I resumed, "and tell Mrs. Besom to give every single one of them a month's

notice, so that they can't complain of being imprisoned and badly treated any more. His Majesty is going away, and I am going to be married, and Mrs. Randolph," looking at Esmée, who blushed, "would like to begin with a new lot."

This touched Williams much more nearly than the other announcement, I could see, and excited a much deeper interest.

"Telegraph up to London," I added, "and tell the Stores or somebody to send down some fireworks to celebrate the occasion. And we'll let them off on the side of the park nearest the village, so that the villagers can see."

All the rest of that day we spent on tenterhooks. I telegraphed to London for news several times, and received always the same answer, confirmed by the evening paper. A Reuter's telegram announced that an armed secret society was making a forced march on the Cathayan capital, but the agency did not seem to think the news of much importance. Beginning to grow doubtful with the reaction of my triumph of the morning, I telegraphed to Sung-Ching, and received an answer an hour later:

"What I have told you is true. All will be known in a few days."

A few days! but that seemed to us in our present tension of mind an eternity to wait. As to the Emperor, he went into the banqueting hall, which looked north, and stood there with arms outstretched, apparently praying extensively, though I caught and understood but little of his supplications. The Cathayans never indulge in acts of worship unless they want something—an attitude towards Divinity, by the way, which is not peculiar to the Flowery Land.

The paragraphs in the daily papers with regard to the

"insurrection in Cathay," as they called it, grew in size and importance every day. The fact of the Empress Ah-Seu's death was obviously not known, as the periodicals invariably spoke of the "Empress and her Government." According to them, the "insurrection" was encouraged by the Dowager in order to menace the encroaching Russians.

It was not obvious under this hypothesis why the "insurgents" were advancing on her capital, but this our sapient contemporaries explained away by averring that the Empress, after having stirred up the rebellion, found herself unable to check it. Meanwhile all Europeans fled before the advancing wave, and it seemed that the foreign devil was indeed to be expunged from the land.

Three days after his first telegram, Sung-Ching again wired to me :

"The army of secret societies has entered Cambaluc and proclaimed Chin-Wang once more Ruler of the Yellow. I, Sung-Ching, salute the Son of Heaven. May his grave be always green and his sons mighty bowmen."

That day we ran the Dragon flag of Cathay up a flagstaff on the roof, that all the county might see if they chose. Mr. Abercrombie, however, declined to allow the church bells to be rung, asserting that the Emperor was a heathen potentate and the bells sacred instruments of music. So in revenge we lighted enormous bonfires in three several places in the park and invited all his parishioners to come and see. Moreover, with the assistance of Tralee and Fiennes, who came down from London as soon as they heard the news in order to be "in at the death," as Tralee infelicitously expressed it, we had a display of fireworks which utterly threw into the shade the one I had to celebrate the Diamond Jubilee. This part of the celebration—the

Emperor enormously enjoyed. He sat in a chair between Esmée and her aunt, with Cuckoo on his knee, while the Blessed Damozel shrieked and shouted her shrill pæan into his ear, and Pilkington, Fiennes, Tralee, and I plunged and coughed in the fragrant smoke some yards distant. Rockets shot shrieking into the air and burst in showers of parti-coloured stars; Bengal lights turned soft blue night into a ghastly livid day; Catherine wheels, recognising amateurs in their manipulators, refused to act, and a misty grey balloon floated triumphantly over the house. But most of all the Emperor clapped and the Blessed Damozel howled applause, when we wrote in letters of fire right across the west façade of the house: "Long live the Emperor of Cathay." Nevertheless, to Chin-Wang, the greatest ceremony of that great day was when he came into my room where I was washing away the blackening effects of the fireworks.

"Louis," he said, in that *ton du roi* which he had so lately adopted, "give me the imperial ring of Cathay. Now that I reign once more I will wear the jewel of my forefathers."

The ring reposed in my safe ever since the death of Wu-Chow, its jealous guardian; but now I hastened to take it out and hand it, just as it was in a twist of brown paper, to its regal owner. He put it on his finger with all the gravity of an act of investiture.

"I am always the Son of Heaven," he remarked, "but when the ring is not there I am no more Hwang-Te (Ruler of the Yellow). Louis," he added, taking his eyes from the ruby to my face, "I now make you the First Mandarin of all my Empire. You shall wear the carbuncle button and the sacred golden dragon, and the revenues of three provinces shall be yours."

"I am very grateful for your Majesty's kindness and

condescension," I remarked, "and I shall be proud to wear the honourable insignia of your Majesty's service" (never intending to do anything of the sort, even if permitted by Act of Parliament. What should I do with a mandarin's button?). "But I think, sire, you had better apportion the revenues of your provinces among your ministers, lest there should be jealousy."

"Let them be jealous, sons of slaves that they are," said Chin-Wang calmly; "the Son of Heaven shall honour whom he pleases to honour."

"But it won't do to begin your new reign with an act which is sure to be unpopular, sire," I urged.

He always listened to my arguments (not like Pilkington), and after a minute he nodded his head.

"You speak as Sung-Taou spoke," he said, and then I knew I could not have said anything more acceptable. "'Seem to serve the people,' said he, 'that they should in truth serve you.' "

The next day the world knew. Then there was astonishment and surprise and excitement, and lots of people discovered that they had believed in "the impostor at Blatchford" all along, and that Louis Randolph, instead of being a liar and a lunatic, was a man of discernment, not to say genius. Had I not known the ways of this wicked world too well, I should have blushed at the fulsome praise which was showered on me for the "steadfastness" and "nobility" and "heroism" of my conduct. A short time before I was a monomaniac and it was extensively prophesied that I should come to a bad end. Now, laurels were flung on my head and flowers at my feet—figuratively, for I remained almost as closely shut up in Blatchford as before. Only I dispensed with my army of detectives and night watchmen, which was replaced by a few officials appointed by the State to watch over

the safety of a foreign potentate temporarily residing in England. The local paper made a regular Court Circular to record the daily doings of his Celestial Majesty, as far as they could be ascertained, and the keeper, whose trial luckily coincided with the new state of things, was unanimously found guilty and received the hard measure he so thoroughly deserved in consequence.

As to "the county," it poured through the gates of Blatchford. I had to start a book for visitors, with "The Emperor of Cathay" stamped in gold letters on the cover, like the visiting books in European royal residences, and it filled rapidly. Tourists besieged the place, and the villagers amassed fortunes and became utterly spoilt in consequence. My servants put on such airs that I rejoiced mightily to think that they were all to leave my service, and only Williams and Parsons rose superior to the prevailing corruption. The Emperor meanwhile remained impervious to all this disturbance raging round him. I continued to guard him against the incursions of strangers, and he had no idea how they pressed upon the park gates to get a sight of him. I doubt if their curiosity was ever gratified. Possibly some of them may have caught a glimpse of a slight insignificant figure in ordinary European clothes and, expecting to see something magnificent in Imperial robes with peacock feathers waving over his head, never dreamt that they had set eyes on the Emperor of far Cathay. The whole world might be excited, but Chin-Wang took our altered circumstances with royal and Oriental calm. His people had called for him, as he always expected they would, and he was waiting for their due submission in silence and dignity. Violet wrote to me from London, and the burden of her epistle amused me much. She had of late permitted herself a cynical freedom of speech.

"You can't think what a difference this news has made," she wrote; "we are now quite famous and celebrated as the relations of the great Randolph, the host of the Cathayan Emperor. Do you mind your poor relations hanging on to the skirts of your glory? 'Nous ne sommes pas la rose, mais nous avons vécu près d'elle.' 'What, anything to do with *the* Randolph?' I hear people ask at dinners and such parties as there are this October. And then they are surprisingly polite, and all our idiotic sayings get praised and all our feeble jokes laughed at, as if they were emanations of wit and genius. Giles revels in it, rolling over and over like a cat basking in the sun. And that dreadful girl" (meaning the fair Alberta, to whom the fastidious Violet could not "reconcile herself") "encourages him and is delighted. She thinks it is giving her quite a *cachet*, and if it weren't for the fact that her trousseau isn't ready, I think she would marry Giles tomorrow, so as to identify herself thoroughly with the family fortunes. How horrid people all are! I met Mr. —, Lord —'s secretary at the F.O., at dinner last night. Of course he assured me that he and his chief had believed in you all along, but I knew how much of that to discount. He talked about the difficult position they had been in, till at last I said, 'Well, at any rate, it was nothing to the difficulty of the position my uncle was in!' I can't put up with these soft-speaking diplomats. The funniest thing of all is the effect upon mamma. You know how she hated the Emperor and never would speak to him or look at him, and how she insisted all the time that he was an impostor? Now she talks as if he were her son and an injured martyr, whom she had comforted and upheld from the first. And you are 'that dear fellow Louis, who has behaved so gallantly,' and Esmée, 'the charming talented girl he is going to marry.' She gets a great deal of

undeserved kudos in consequence, and crusty old Aunt Ulrica Norwich, who thinks nobody but her own family worth a moment's consideration, told me my dear mother was an angel, and such a true friend. It may be true, but as regards her behaviour to the Emperor and to you, it certainly isn't.

"P.S. Lord Tralee is dining here to-night."

CHAPTER XXX

ON THE TYING UP OF MANY DOCUMENTS

ON October 17th, the Cathayan Ambassador to the Court of St. James's came down to Blatchford to do homage to his Imperial master. I met his Excellency's special train, and there was such a crowd at our local station as the countryside had never seen before. The spectacle of five or six Celestial gentlemen all in full Cathayan dress debouching on the platform, was one which gave local tongues occasion to wag for months if not years. The multitude had to be violently cleared by the village constable from the path of the Ambassador, as fan in hand and his silken garments rustling, he followed me to the barouche which stood waiting outside. Sung-Ching, stiff with golden embroidery, came in the same carriage; for the other members of the Embassy an open landau and a brougham were provided.

The Ambassador, during the short drive up to the house, conversed courteously, but without any reference to the sojourn which I had made under his roof and which might have had such unpleasant results. He seemed to take it as all in the day's work and to assume that I should do likewise. Sung-Ching wore his enigmatical smile and said nothing. As we got out and the Ambassador was passing up the steps some yards ahead, he turned to me and opened his mouth for the first time.

"Aha, Mr. Randolph, you did not believe in me!"

I at least have the courage of my convictions.

"I didn't," I retorted, "and I put it to you, do you think you behaved in such a way as to convince me?"

"But you must remember that I had a part to play," he said unabashed. "Have you not a proverb? 'Necessity——'"

"Is the mother of invention?" It's an excuse many people might use for telling lots of lies. Yes."

"I did not mean that," replied Sung-Ching; "some words about the devil driving."

Here the Ambassador looked round, and the other attachés, secretaries, or whatever they were, having arrived, I ushered them all into the Emperor's presence without delay. Chin-Wang was seated in a chair at the end of the Marble hall as the most impressive room in the house, and it was rich and rare to see this half dozen of his most imposing subjects, arrayed as they were in all their Oriental finery, trailing themselves up the long length of a big room to his feet. Arrived at the imperial footstool, the Ambassador prostrated himself forehead to floor so many times that I got too dizzy to count them; Sung-Ching and the others advanced to a nicety to the distances their respective ranks and positions qualified them to occupy from the imperial person, and grovelled uninterruptedly during the whole interview.

The Ambassador laid the empire at his sovereign's feet, and begged him to resume his sceptre, proffering his own renewed allegiance as an earnest of the submission of the rest of the people. But he brought a pardon that the Emperor might promise by sign-manual to extend mercy to all who had, in any way, under coercion of the late Empress-Dowager, been obliged to act against his imperial welfare.

The Emperor looked towards me for advice. I was aghast, for I did not know what fate of empires might hang on my careless words.

"I should think it over, sire," I hastily counselled in English.

"We will consider your request," said the Emperor royally in Tartar; "meanwhile, the audience is finished."

The Ambassador looked rather evil as I ushered him into the banqueting hall, where a meal was set before him and his subordinates; I myself and the Emperor lunched with the ladies in the Dutch room; but his Excellency might have considered himself insulted if asked to do so, and I did not think it worth risking.

Afterwards Sung-Ching sought me out.

"The pardon must be signed," he said; "it is a piece of waste paper only, for all that acted against the Emperor will in time be removed in any case. We hold all the reins of power."

"Then it seems to me that by restoring the Emperor you are merely transferring the power from one clique to another, and everything will be as bad as ever."

Sung-Ching smiled.

"Our ways are not your ways," he averred.

"Well, I suppose no nation is ruled, save by intrigue," I said with a sigh. "Thank God, I never meddled with the witches' caldron they call politics. Then you are sure the Emperor had better sign."

"Trust me at last, O unbelieving Englishman!" ejaculated Sung-Ching.

So the Emperor signed the pardon, and I went up to London by the same special as the Ambassador to see my lawyer and sign my will and marriage settlements. I think my documents were the most momentous after all.

On the way up, I fell upon Sung-Ching, and demanded an explanation of all things from the beginning.

"I know that a big game has been played and that I have taken a hand in it, but I have been playing in the dark all the time," I remarked; "and, as I gather that you and your party are the third players, I should like to hear something of your methods."

"No doubt you have been puzzled," returned Sung-Ching complacently, as if he were certain that the tortuousness of all Oriental dealing was enough to puzzle anybody, which indeed it was. "This intrigue has been of long standing, even since the boyhood of the Son of Heaven. There has been for many years a progressive party in Cathay, against which the Empress Ah-Seu, now dead, has fought with her whole soul and her whole strength. Yet it grew and grew, and one day it must have been stronger than she, till its progress was thrown back and its growth stunted by the impetuosity of my unfortunate brother, Sung-Taou."

"Sung-Taou was so sensible that it seems a pity he got killed in spite of all his cleverness," I remarked.

Sung-Ching seemed unmoved.

"What says K'ung-Fu-Tze?" he said. "'The great mountain must crumble, the strong beam must break, the wise man must wither away as a plant.'

"Sung-Taou," he resumed, "had been bred in our modern Cathayan ideas, and he did not think that to a new and untaught mind like that of the Son of Heaven they would run riot, like a fire in a forest in June. So thereby came disaster to Sung-Taou, but salvation to the Son of Heaven, because before, the progressive party had intended, when they had the power, to dethrone him and to bring up a young Emperor to think with their thoughts and to see with their eyes. But when they perceived that the Son

of Heaven was willing and ready to embrace the new ideas which were introduced to him by Sung-Taou, they were glad. For a regency is a bad thing at best, and many things may happen before the sovereign is of age to rule. So Sung-Taou was useful to his party and fulfilled a mission which was intrusted to his discretion to fill or not as he thought fit."

"Then Sung-Taou was a martyr," I observed.

"No great movement but exacts blood," said Sung-Ching. "They that fall in a great cause, have died gloriously, and if there is a heaven, without doubt they have gained it."

"And if there is none, it is a poor consolation," I remarked.

"Better so to die than to live unknown," said Sung-Ching sententiously.

"But as far as I can make out, poor Sung-Taou died as unknown as he could possibly have lived," I argued.

"Not to his fellow countrymen," returned the martyr's brother proudly; "with us Sung-Taou's blood has cried for blood in vengeance and his soul has seen it on our reeking blades when we stormed Cambaluc."

"Well, go on with the story," I said. But I was deucedly sorry for Sung-Taou all the same.

"Before Sung-Taou died, he sent back news to the Son of Heaven that he was taken," resumed Sung-Ching, "and at that moment his judgment, which was ever rash and impetuous, outran bounds, for he could not have done a less wise thing. For the Son of Heaven was fiery, like all Tartars and such as come from the north, and in his wrath he said too much and forgot the power which the Empress Ah-Seu yet had in the palace. So she rose, as an old cobra rises hooded out of a dark corner, and

struck as it strikes, unfalteringly and without error. And then it became a question of saving the Son of Heaven or letting him perish. Our party was not strong in the Privy Council, and such as were there were paralysed by the action of the Empress Ah-Seu. The heads were also far away, and the Son of Heaven would have been lost, though that would have made little difference to our plans in the end, retarding them merely for a while."

I hated the cold-blooded way in which he seemed to juggle with lives and crowns.

"Then who was sufficiently disinterested to intervene on the Emperor's behalf? Prince Yih?" I hazarded.

"No, Prince Yih is not of us. He was a sluggish and bloated man, that would sell his soul for a good dish or the chink of money."

"Then you bribed him?"

"It was not we. But the young Empress, the wife of the Son of Heaven, was very beautiful, and though she was not the great woman that Ah-Seu was, she had a cunning of her own, like all other women. And she made a secret meeting with Prince Yih, and offered him gold and jewels, and plied him with rich wines and dainty dishes, and promised him the kisses of her sweet mouth, if he would but save her lord. Prince Yih was already rich, and he resisted the gold, but the wine weakened his resolution, and the thought of her love bribed him, for she was the most beautiful woman in Cathay."

"Strange that the Emperor has never spoken to me of her, if she was so very beautiful," I remarked.

"You forget," said Sung-Ching coldly, "that with us it is not thought correct to mention those of the inner chamber, as we call them. The Son of Heaven observes etiquette still, among all that he has forgotten."

"Yes, yes," I said, for I felt that all these digressions hindered the story ; "and so——?"

"And so Prince Yih swore to the young Empress, and he contrived so that the Son of Heaven was saved ; but why he chose the mandarin Wu-Chow as his instrument, none of us know to this day. My surmise is that Prince Yih had some hold over Wu-Chow of which we are ignorant and shall remain ignorant, as Wu-Chow and Prince Yin are both since dead."

"Or he may have bribed him," I suggested, knowing how large a part corruption by filthy lucre plays in Celestial intrigues.

"That is also possible," said Sung-Ching, and went on with his story.

"Then when Wu-Chow was safely out of Cambaluc with his charge, Prince Yih went to the young Empress to claim his reward. But instead of a fair living woman, he found a cold corpse, for the Empress had poisoned herself as soon as she heard that the Son of Heaven was beyond reach. So Prince Yih was balked, and in his rage and disappointment he went to the Empress Ah-Seu and told her all."

Thus baldly did Sung-Ching skim over what appeared to me the most pitiful part of the whole tragedy. Visions of that lonely latter-day Cleopatra (only so much more worthy than Cleopatra), fair as the Tartar women can be sometimes, the pick of the beauty of an Empire, living, doubtless, a sad, desolate life in the midst of luxury, dying alone by her own hand unpitied and unmourned, floated before my eyes, distracting my attention from the rest of the story.

"Does the Emperor know that the young Empress is dead?" I asked.

"I suppose not; but how can I tell?" said Sung-Ching

phlegmatically. The man was as unfeeling as a machine. "I have not told him; but what if she is dead? She had no son."

"He may have been fond of her for all that," I remarked; but Sung-Ching waved my frivolous suggestions aside.

"In any case, his confession did not benefit Prince Yih, for the Empress Ah-Seu had him beheaded in her rage when the Son of Heaven escaped her junks. When first he spoke, however, she sent in pursuit of Wu-Chow at once, and he was easily traced to the coast. But he had had the start, and his choice of a common fishing-boat to convey himself and the Son of Heaven to safety, complicated everything, for the junks had to search every vessel on the seas that they met, and the lucky star of Wu-Chow prevented them from boarding his till it was picked up by your yacht. But still no one knows why Wu-Chow made for the open sea, for thereby he multiplied the chances of being overtaken."

"We say that there is a Providence which watches over children, madmen, and drunkards," I said.

"This must indeed have protected Wu-Chow," replied Sung-Ching, "for though he was old and certainly not drunk, he was very foolish. Madness is a fine word. He was merely foolish. Yet Heaven guided him to your yacht and fore-ordained that you should be an Englishman, one of the race that give up their own way to none, be it never so hard to keep——"

"Nor so mad to follow," I put in. Sung-Ching smiled and did not contradict me.

"It happened just as your yacht sighted the fishing-boat, that a junk had marked it down and knew that it contained what the Cathayans were looking for. So word ran round their fleet, and they tried, but feebly, to detain you, for

many that commanded and manned the junks were of the progressive party and more feared to interfere too much with an Englishman. Besides, they were not at all certain that their party wished the capture of the Son of Heaven. So you escaped for the time being, and they, knowing that it was of no avail to pursue your fast yacht with their sailing junks and damaged cruisers, made what speed they might to communicate with the Russian fleet which lay not so far away, just outside the Straits of Kew-chow-wang. What they told the Russian admiral, I cannot tell you, for Lew-Fung, who commanded the fleet, was killed fighting before Cambaluc a week or two ago. But whether he knew the truth or was gulled by some plausible falsehood, the Russian thought he had ground to pursue you, and it was well there was a typhoon, or you would probably be lying fathoms deep in the Cathayan Ocean at this moment and the Son of Heaven with you."

"How," I asked, "are you able to tell me all this consecutively so as to put in my hand all the links I had missed in the chain? You were not there."

"You forget that we have all the modern means of communication and that the whole Empire is full of our brethren, unsuspected by the rest. We have undermined every office in the State, every class in the community. Our spies are everywhere, and they carry their lives in their hand; therefore they are more cautious and secret than those of the Empress Ah-Seu. I have known, we have all known, step by step, everything which has happened during all these months."

"And yet you could not save your Emperor?"

"To declare ourselves before we were ready, with the Empress Ah-Seu still in power? Would that have been good policy? Rather the Son of Heaven should die than that Cathay should fall into the hands of foreign

conquerors. And to this end the late Empress led the empire, while she fancied she was preserving its ancient honour."

"Then is your Ambassador one of you?" I asked.

"No. Therefore as long as the Empress Ah-Seu was alive, he had power. But all his plots against the person of the Son of Heaven failed, because you stood between. For this our party is glad, for it might have been difficult to protect the Son of Heaven if it had not been for you. However, when it was supposed that you would land him at Hong Kong, all was arranged and ready, and he would have been taken to Thibet to be concealed in safety among the fastnesses there. But it is better as it is. The Son of Heaven has seen the world and he will be the less heavily weighted by ignorance in the new life he must lead."

I could not help smiling at my park at Blatchford being called the world. Yet doubtless the Emperor's mind had expanded since he left Cathay. I only hoped he would find some one able and sympathetic to support and lead him on—some one more like Sung-Taou and less like Sung-Ching.

"Then tell me," I went on, "was it you that wrote me the warning to the theatre?"

"It was I."

"Then it was also you that wrote the direction on the poisoned sweets?" I exclaimed.

Sung-Ching bent his head.

"But you must remember," said he, "that I had a triple part to play. I had to serve my party, and I could best do that by remaining where I was without exciting suspicion. And I had to serve the Son of Heaven, who loved my brother Sung-Taou and who stood in the place of dead rulers that had done well by my ancestors; and

that I could also do best by remaining where I was and learning all that I could. And I had to serve my own neck, lest, being the brother of Sung-Taou, it should be severed in two ; and for that service I had often and again to appear other than what I was and zealous for the Empress Ah-Seu and her decrees. But now that the Empress Ah-Seu is dead, and her power fallen, we can all appear in our own coats and smile or frown to our own fancy."

Which is a thing I doubt any lying Celestial doing.

On arriving in London, I parted with the Ambassador and Sung-Ching and the rest without "the least regret, except that we had ever met," for I did not think much of any of them, and went to my own house. I had promised to take Violet to a theatre, and I had not very much time to get tickets, order a table at a restaurant, dress myself and go to fetch her. I did not include in the invitation my sister-in-law ; I wanted to extend the sphere of happy escapes.

During dinner at the restaurant Violet evidently had something on her mind. Five several times she opened her mouth to make me a party to it, and each time thought better of it. When we were driving to the theatre, however, she said suddenly :

"Has your engagement revolutionised all your ideas on matrimony, Louis ?"

"Certainly not. Why should it ? They are very sound ideas and conspicuous for their insight and wisdom."

"Then you still think no one ought to marry who hasn't got £10,000 a year ?"

"I never said so," I answered.

"Oh, then you do think one might marry on nothing ?" She snatched the words out of my mouth.

"Is there no margin between nothing and £10,000 a

year?" I asked patiently. "Besides, it depends on how the contracting parties are brought up and what are their tastes. You, for instance, I should be very sorry to give away at the altar—if you would let me—to a man who hadn't a solid balance at the banker's."

"I knew you would say that," said Violet in a sorrowful tone; "but men with solid balances are always so horrid."

"Don't tell me, Violet, that you have fallen in love after all your protestations!"

"I am engaged," whispered Violet.

"My dear, I congratulate you, and hope I may be able to do so still more when I know who the lucky man is."

"Didn't I write and tell you?" she said in a slightly hurt tone.

"Not a syllable."

"I'm sure I said Lord Tralee was dining with us last night."

"Well?"

"You are no artist, you cannot even draw an inference," cried Violet, pretending to be pettish.

"Oh, it's Tralee, is it?" I exclaimed, as the light broke in on me.

"Of course it is. Who else could it be?"

"Well, I didn't know. I've not observed—I mean I didn't think you'd fancy—I mean, Tralee's a good fellow," I finished, "but—"

"I know! I know!" cried Violet, "he's got no money. But I suppose, in a sort of way—not of course for years and years, but when mamma—or if Giles—you know what I mean—I have got some sort of prospects, haven't I? We've all got prospects."

"Yes, but prospects don't buy bread and butter." e

"Does it cost so very much?" asked Violet pathetically.
"I'm sure I could do without lots of things if I tried. Particularly if I—was fond of anybody. I'm sure I don't want more than one house, and I could do without a carriage, and I don't care about diamonds much, they don't suit me."

"My dear, you've had everything you want all your life——"

"But what's the good of that if I can't have the one thing I want most?" asked Violet mournfully.

"And you'll always expect to have it," I finished.
"And Tralee's a good sort, but he's not a god, and in time you may begin to wonder why you've given up everything you care for and can't live without, for his sake."

"Is that how you would feel about Esmée if you were both poor?" demanded Violet.

"No," I replied with conviction; "but then Esmée is an angel."

"And I am sure Maurice is an archangel."

Silence. I really could not encourage Violet to marry Tralee, with tastes like hers. She had not the most shadowy ideas of economy. They would have £500 a year between them, and I shuddered to think what their debts probably were.

"I suppose I shall have to wait till I am twenty-five," she remarked presently in a hopeless voice, "if you won't give your consent. Luckily it's less than six months, and at any rate it is unlucky to be a bridesmaid when you're engaged, so it will save me from having to follow that dreadful girl of Giles's up the aisle."

And there was a catch in her voice that made my heart as butter. I never could refuse her anything, even when she and Theodora, minxes of thirteen and seventeen in

short petticoats, decoyed me into Bond Street and made me buy them diamond necklaces. There was only one logical sequence. When the Emperor was gone, I should have so much more than Esmée and I needed.

"Very well, Violet," I said, "I suppose I had better see you through."

CHAPTER XXXI

I HAVE SEVERAL REASONS TO BE PROUD

I WENT down again to Blatchford the next morning, but the old peace of our rural retreat was absolutely disturbed, the old monotony had given place to a hurry of preparation for the Emperor's departure and for my own abandonment of the state of single blessedness. It seemed to me that there was no occasion whatever for the rush and bustle in which we spent the next two weeks, but it appeared to please everybody else so much that it would have been a pity to deprive them of such simple pleasures. A visit from a Prominent Personage to the Emperor of Cathay was impending, and it caused a subterranean excitement which rose up to my quarter of the house like the rumbling before an earthquake. A galaxy of the great lights of officialdom were to accompany the Prominent Personage, and the entire entertainment was to take the form of a sort of State visitation. The village carpenters wanted to erect triumphal arches, and were much hurt when I said I scarcely thought they would be required. Mr. Abercrombie rushed into the breach with the suggestion that the church bells should ring a peal, the Prominent Personage not being a heathen potentate but the representative of the Defender of the Faith ; to which I replied that I doubted if the Prominent Personage, being no longer very young, would be able to hear them, and that

thus they would be wasted. The rector and the carpenters both thought me very unsympathetic.

The Prominent Personage came and saw and did not conquer worth a red cent, to use an American expression; for the Emperor himself bore away all the honours on this historic occasion. When I showed the Prominent Personage and his following of glittering notabilities into the room where the Emperor awaited them, lo! the Son of Heaven was robed in all the gorgeousness of his native trappings of State.. A crimson mantle of velvet embroidered with golden dragons weighted his narrow shoulders, a golden sun glinted on the breast of his yellow silk robes, and on his head he wore the conical Cathayan headgear, with a diamond on the top that literally blazed in a point of light. In his right hand he held a shimmering fan, and on the middle finger of his left, the great imperial ruby winked like a sullen eye. Under all this magnificence, the Chin-Wang we knew every day had disappeared, and a new and very dignified sovereign stood in his place. His timidity and shrinking from strangers had melted away, as it were in the shadow of the crown upon his head. Perhaps it was because at last he knew that he reigned indeed; perhaps he remembered in his vague way that a few weeks ago all these people who were now so anxious to pay him court, scouted him as a mere make-believe potentate. At all events, he was most imperial, and I was proud of him.

Besides the chief one, there were one or two minor Prominences connected with the powers that be and by them ordered to repair to Blatchford to do tardy honour to one of the greatest of earth's rulers. There, too, was the Prince of Soria, himself a reigning potentate over a tract of country about the size of a pocket-handkerchief, but ever eager to identify himself with any movement

that might be afoot. The English Ambassador to Cathay, who happened to be on leave in England, and the Home Secretary appeared together. Her Majesty's Master of the Ceremonies was there also, though there were mercifully no ceremonies to master, and Lord ——, who at once came up to me and tried fruitlessly to convince me, as his secretary did Violet, that he had placed implicit credence in me the year before at the Foreign Office.

"I am very glad it has all come right, Mr. Randolph," he said; "I felt sure——"

"If you had believed in me when first I communicated the matter, my lord, I should not have gone in danger of my life all these months," I remarked unforgivingly; for I could not stomach being told that he "felt sure" by the man who had left me to my fate.

We had a great luncheon in the banqueting hall, and to this were invited a number of the leading lights of "the county." The Duchess of Leicestershire was there (the Duke was a sort of myth, he never appeared), and the Crichtons, and Lord Stamborough, our other county member, and Sir Frederick Moon with an American wife who kept things lively at her table. She was extremely anxious to be presented to the Emperor, whom she declared to be "too sweet for anything." There were a lot of other people whom I was almost too busy to notice, and we all lunched at small tables in order arranged by Esmée and her invaluable aunt. At mine, of course, I had the Prominent Personage to my right, and Esmée sat next him and tried to cope with his compliments. Beyond her was another Prominency of lesser glory, and then the Duchess of Leicestershire, Lord ——, and a third Prominency parted by some other local lady of standing, the Prince of Soria and the Emperor, who sat on my left. This magnificence would have been very weighty but for the

incessant conversation of the Prince of Soria, a lively and witty man, who succeeded in dispersing the cloud of grandeur overhanging us. The Emperor was obviously much bored. He did not understand his neighbour's witticisms, and he had no ideas to exchange with the Prominent Personage, though the latter tried hard, across me, to find topics of mutual interest. We toiled through many courses, fruitlessly pursuing this end.

At the cheese stage there was a scuffle at the door. My back was that way, so all I saw was the Emperor looking round and beckoning. Then the curly head of the Blessed Damozel suddenly appeared at my elbow, as she cheerfully pushed herself in between us, announcing in a high, untroubled voice :

"Williams said you were having a great, big, huge luncheon party, and I wasn't to come in ; but I thought the Majesty-Emperor would be *so* disappointed if he couldn't give me something nice."

"Cuckoo'd be 'pointed, too," put in her brother from the rear.

The Emperor turned incontinently from his uncomprehended neighbour and applied himself to the service of the Blessed Damozel. That exacting daughter of Eve made no secret of her desires and opinions. The Emperor might rule five hundred millions of the human race, temporarily Miss Clifford ruled him, and that with a rod of iron. Cuckoo coquettled with the company from a distance of three yards from the table before deciding to accept the blandishments of the Prominent Personage.

That High One of the Earth, when he went away, congratulated me on the surprising presentableness of my Emperor. He seemed to think me personally responsible. I admit that I felt proud when the Emperor rose to leave the table, and all the other guests at their tables rose,

too, and stared with all their eyes as His Celestial Majesty passed up the steps into the Marble hall, listening to the remarks of the Prominent Personage, while the Blessed Damozel skipped by his side, holding his imperial hand. Did they envy me for the honour and glory which now late in the day accrued to me for being the host of an Emperor of Cathay, a distinction no Englishman had ever won before, nor will, I think, soon win again? I hope they did, for it is grateful to be envied. They could know nothing of the suspense and responsibility I incurred in guarding that precious life. But Esmée and the Emperor, they understood.

We were married on October 26th, and on the same afternoon the Emperor sailed in the *Flosshilde*, which I lent him for his return journey. He was to have an escort of British men-of-war down the Channel and, I believe, across the Mediterranean. Also Pilkington volunteered to go with him in the character of his Physician-in-Ordinary.

"Don't expect Samuel to stay long with you, sire," I warned the Emperor; "he'll soon want to begin roaming again."

"He shall write books," promised Chin-Wang, as a concession to Pilkington's insatiable desire for movement; "great books, of many volumes, and wise as the writings of Mang-Tze."

On the evening of the 25th, I was suddenly invaded in Bryanston Square by Lady Frances, remarking that she was "surprised" that she had not been asked to the wedding.

"I am still more surprised that you want to come," I returned; "my distinct impression is that when last we met, we parted bad friends."

"Oh, Louis, never! How can you imagine that I should

ever do anything so improper—so *wrong* as to quarrel with my relations?"

"To what end, then, did you make all the ingratiating remarks which largely composed our last interview," I inquired, "when you implied unmistakably that you did not wish to meet my wife and that Giles was to be congratulated on his 'escape' in her not having accepted him? Do you expect me to remember these kind and endearing observations of yours with gratitude and satisfaction? In a word, do you suppose me to be more than mortal?"

"You are always very bitter, Louis," she returned, not in the least disconcerted; "you ought to forgive and forget what one says on the impulse of the moment when one is much annoyed."

"Well, I'm not blessed with a short memory," I replied, "and I never forgive malice."

"Is it impossible," inquired my sister-in-law in an exasperated manner, as if I were the aggressor, "to convince you that certain things are not *done*?"

"Quite. Because when 'certain things' are those I particularly dislike and disapprove of, they always are done —by my relations."

"What do you suppose will be said if you omit your nearest from the invitations to your wedding?" she proceeded.

"Good Lord, Frances! come to forty thousand weddings if you are so anxious to. Who do you suppose will be affected either way whether you are there or not? I merely expressed my surprise at your wanting to come."

"I wish always to do what is right," she returned in an aggrieved tone.

"I wish you wished to do what is pleasant to other people! However, consider the incident closed, and be sure I shall never open it again."

It always was, and I imagine always will be, impossible

to convince my sister-in-law that one can be annoyed or offended by anything which it suits her royal pleasure to do. She looked upon herself as an injured martyr, because I reminded her of her own remarks and asserted that they were unpleasant, which they undoubtedly were.

I suppose that all wedding ceremonies are exactly like all other wedding ceremonies, and that mine was only distinguished from the rest by the fact that the Emperor of Cathay was present at it. He sat by himself in the chancel, and how much he understood of what went on, and what he thought of it, God alone knows, for it never transpired. He deprived Esmée of her rightful meed of stares as the heroine of the hour, for all eyes were turned gloatingly towards the direction of the chancel, and all necks craned to catch a glimpse of the Imperial person. My register bore the Imperial signature in Cathayan characters, but at the house where the wedding breakfast was held—that of Esmée's aunt in Portman Square—the Emperor was conspicuous by his absence, and the crowding, curious guests were disappointed.

Violet at the last moment cried off being a bridesmaid, but the Blessed Damozel figured as a trainbearer and Cuckoo as a page, and were immensely proud of themselves as forming part of the pageant. At the house, with a *sangfroid* which astounded me, Giles ushered his *fiancée* up to Esmée and introduced them to each other. Mrs. Louis Randolph was, of course, all graciousness, but I heard Violet remarking for Miss Ruggles's benefit:

"I have always been told that

"If you change the name and not the letter,
You change for the worse and not the better."

"Ow! you are going to change the name too," was Miss Ruggles's idea of a retort.

"Ah, but Esmée and I change the letter as well!" said Violet cheerfully.

Before we went away, *en route* for Paris, the Emperor left to take up his sceptre again and to rule where his fathers had ruled before him. He did not pass through the crowd which munched wedding cake and gabbled and gazed, half-envious, half-depreciating, at rows of wedding presents, but such of us as knew that he was going saw him to say good-bye. To each of these he said a few words in farewell, with the exception of Lady Frances, who stood curtseying in the doorway, and whom he passed with only a bow. To Esmée he turned first with his fleeting smile.

"Perhaps one day not long away you will come to my mean palace. I will have a glass of the green drink for you. You see," he added, "I remember always and I forget never."

"I wish your Majesty would remember something less dreadful of me than green chartreuse!" cried Esmée, blushing at this exposure of her weaknesses.

"Well," said the Emperor gravely, "I will remember your white dress and your hair of sun-glory."

To the rector he said :

"When next in the Temple of Heaven I look to the north, whence the conquerors of Cathay come always, and all greatness, I will pray for you."

The rector was not delighted.

Next came Violet and Tralee.

"One day," said the Emperor, looking from one to the other, "you shall come to Cambaluc, and we will play, oh! many more games on the ice. Tra-Lee," he added, laying his hand on Tralee's arm, "is a mighty man. I wish that all my army was as Tra-Lee."

With the children, he abandoned his smile and tone

of condescension, and melted down into tenderness. He kissed Cuckoo and said mournfully :

"Coo-coo will not remember me when I am far away on the sea. He will play with the little wooden horse which he thinks as holy as his father's grave, and he will forget me."

"S'an't," contradicted Cuckoo decidedly. "I loves you very much," he added, scenting a necessity for endearments in the air.

The Emperor rested his hand on the Blessed Damozel's rebellious hair.

"When my little daughter is grown up, she shall marry a Prince of the Blood and I will come back and see her too in her white 'dress.'

"I would rather marry you," was the aspiration of the unmaidenly Damozel. Her small but soft heart was rent by these melancholy suggestions of a long farewell.

"We will see what we can arrange," answered the Emperor gravely.

To me he said more down the stairs towards his waiting carriage, as he leant on my arm in his old way.

"If I have said little to you, Louis, because I go and you will not see me any more, it is not because I have felt little. It is the empty cave that makes the loudest echo. My heart is here. But the yellow-haired race must go with the yellow-haired, and the black-haired race with the black-haired, and my place is on the loess of Chih-li. Yet my heart is as full as the Sorrow of Han in springtime. He that sits on a throne has few friends, and I have seen but two—you and Sung-Taou, Sung-Taou and you. And one is dead and the other I may not see every day. I would rather stay with you at Blash-fodd and catch the little shining fish and be at peace; but what I wish to do I can never. Men say I am great,

but they speak foolishly, for to be great is to be free, and that I never was. But in the Purple Forbidden City I shall forget you never and the year that we suffered so many dangers."

"Perhaps, sire," I said tentatively, "some one at least may so welcome you in the Purple Forbidden City that you will be glad to return there in the end."

"There is none such," said the Emperor mournfully: "to those I am the Son of Heaven, but to you am I not Tan-Yo, that would be a friend if he could?"

I could not choose that moment of all others to break to him the self-inflicted death of his Empress, "the most beautiful woman in Cathay," yet her unwept and unavenged ghost seemed to hover near us and darken what was of necessity already a sad interview.

"I shall see you again," were the Emperor's last words to me, through the window of the carriage, "and oh, my friend, let it not be long."

It is eight months ago and I have not been to see him yet. Cathay is a long way off and I do not think Esmée enjoys the idea of the journey. Pilkington has never returned; he has found spheres of activity there which keep his mercurial mind in material for books and labour. He writes sometimes and the Emperor constantly, and Chin-Wang's epistles are beginning to acquire a greater degree of lucidity than the famous telegram he sent to Esmée. He tells me a great deal of some subjects, especially of the intricate politics of the Far East, which will be useful to the historian some day, and he observes an unbroken reserve on others. He never told me what his feelings were when he heard of the young Empress's death, but Pilkington writes that the post of "chief wife" is still vacant at Cambaluc.

Sung-Ching has become a Viceroy and there is a new

Ambassador to the Court of St. James's. I trust I may never see Sung-Ching or his former chief again.

Fiennes's picture of the Emperor has been the sensation of this year's Academy; when the exhibition is over, the picture is going to Cambaluc. There is always a crowd in front of it at Burlington House; but I like better a picture which he painted for me and which hangs at this moment in my private den at Blatchford. It represents the first of the five terraces to the lake, and the Emperor and the Blessed Damozel standing on it, preparatory to a fishing expedition; the Emperor is tying a fly on his line, and the Blessed Damozel stands in a characteristic attitude, looking up at him, ready to give suggestions. You can almost hear her high-pitched advice and Chin-Wang's serious replies. There are geraniums in the vases, and daisies studding the grass. In the background, there is a bit of the house with the Dragon Flag floating on a pinnacle; a pictorial licence, for the standard of Cathay decorated my roof but a short time before the Emperor's departure.

The fair Alberta inaugurated her reign at Tranes early in the New Year, and I hear the roof-tiling and staircase-carpeting operations have gone on apace ever since. I believe she sees about as much of Lady Tralee as Mrs. Louis Randolph does of Lady Frances.

Cuckoo has become hazy on the subject of the Majesty-Emperor, but the Blessed Damozel announces her intention of becoming proficient in the Cathayan and Tartar tongues. Lady Frances engaged a new governess for her the other day, whom the Blessed Damozel scouts because she is unable to impart instruction in the idioms of the Far East. When Miss Clifford comes out and causes a stir in Mayfair and Belgravia as the beauty of the season, she will be able to boast that her first love was the Emperor of Cathay.

I do not know if His Celestial Majesty ever fulfilled his promise of praying for Mr. Abercrombie in the Temple of Heaven, but Esmée tells me that she has often noticed on Sundays that the rector, after the words, "Albert Edward, Prince of Wales and the Princess of Wales and all the Royal Family," is attacked by an obviously fictitious fit of coughing, during which it is surmised that he mentally adds the name of the Emperor he looks upon as a heathen potentate.

As to us at Blatchford, we have led for the last few months a life at once less monotonous and less exciting than we did before. We feel safe again at last and I am beginning to forget my Tartar. Even Kwa-Yen returned to his native land in the train of his sovereign, and the incongruous grave of Wu-Chow in the park is now all we have left to remind us of that strange imperial sojourn.

THE END.

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